

TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA



SO in her joy she left the latticed room
And leaned upon the balcony.

Frontispiece

[See p. 73.]

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TALES FROM THE MAHABHARATA

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So in her joy she left the latticed room
 And leaned upon the balcony . . . *Frontispiece*

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TO
HIS HIGHNESS
THE MAHARAJAH OF MYSORE
IN TOKEN OF
RESPECTFUL AFFECTION

INTRODUCTION

THE *Mahábhārata* and the *Ramáyana* have often been compared to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The resemblance is at best only superficial; perhaps it would never have been made had it not been that all four works belong to the epic order of poetry and that the European scholar naturally thinks in terms of Homer. It is true that the *Mahábhārata* deals with the conflagration of a great war set alight by relatively trivial causes; it is true that the *Ramáyana* tells of the wanderings of an exile. But Pan is dead; the Galilean has conquered. Zeus and Apollo, Achilles and Odysseus remain as splendid creations of the poetic genius to remind us of the glory that was Greece. The epics of India have a deeper meaning for to-day. They are living and throbbing in the lives of the people of India, even of those illiterate masses that toil in the fields or maintain a drab existence in the ghettos of the towns. To such as these the famous old stories are the music and the colour of life. They are the perennial fount from which the oft-repeated draughts never quench an insatiable thirst. In the kings' palaces and in the peasants' huts you may still hear the grand legends of the Great War and the pathetic sufferings of Rama and his queen intoned, as the manner of India is, to an enraptured audience. They speak to the people of India as Homer never can to any people of Europe to-day. As Professor Oldenberg has said: "The *Mahábhārata* is the strongest link between old and new India, the India of the Aryan and of the Hindu. If one were to name a single

been the greater attraction to European scholars. The charm and variety of its characters, the nobility and dignity even of those arrayed on the losing side, which represents the Powers of Darkness, and above all the human interest of the plot, give it an advantage over the *Ramáyana*, in which supernatural demons that change their shape at will, magic cars that fly through the air, and monkeys that leap from India to Ceylon are of the essence of the narrative. That, however, is not how India thinks. There Rama is the popular idol. Little temples are built to him in many a village street, and if the supreme figure of Krishna takes an even higher place in the Hindu theocracy, it is Rama who comes nearer to the people's heart and who is, as it were, their familiar spirit. Draupadi, the heroine of the *Mahábhárata*, is no whit behind Sita in all that, according to Hindu conceptions, is best in womanhood, yet it is Sita that in every Hindu home is the type and exemplar for Indian mothers and daughters. It is admitted that the *Ramáyana* is the more perfect work of art in that it fulfils more completely Matthew Arnold's postulate that "the subject of the epic poem must be some *one* great complex action." Like the *Odyssey*, it keeps steadily in view the adventures of Rama in exile as its main theme and as its underlying conception the presentation of the ideal man and the ideal woman. The *Mahábhárata*, grander in conception, loses, in artistic value at any rate, by reason of the mass of disquisitions with which the original poem has been overloaded by later and probably inferior hands in the interests of the Brahman priesthood and to suit the changing religions of India. Swollen by these inventions, the portentous volumes are enough to damp the spirit of the most ardent who, starting off gaily upon their journey, are soon faced by the deserts of Levitical doctrine and the morasses of primitive speculation interesting only to the antiquarian.

Nevertheless, imbedded in much that is dross, we may find many nuggets of pure gold which, but for the hand of the later editors, we should have missed. Apart from the "Bhagavadgítá," or Lord's Song, which Indians claim to be the finest philosophical poem extant, and which, as all critics agree, is an interpolation, may it not be that we should have lost also the exquisite but quite irrelevant story of Savitri, whose noble devotion won back her husband's soul from death, the tender and pathetic romance of Damayanti, who sought her erring husband through three years of suffering, and even the quaint legend which gives us the Hindu version of that universal tradition, the Flood?

How ancient the epic is and to what date should be ascribed the events of which it treats are matters which have greatly exercised Sanskrit scholars. It is now generally recognised that there is historical foundation for the great battle in which the chiefs of the various petty States of the North were ranged on one side or the other, but opinion of its date varies between the extremes of 3100 and 950 B.C. The orthodox Indian opinion, anxious perhaps to exalt the antiquity of its civilisation, clings to the former, relying for proof mainly upon the calculations of Indian astronomers, who place the beginning of the Kali (or Iron) Age of the Hindus, coincident as all agree with the battle, in the year 3101 B.C. Professor Washburn Hopkins accepts Mr. Pargiter's conclusion based upon genealogical data that the war took place in 1100 B.C., but Mr. Pargiter himself, in his latest published work, calculates that the most probable date was about 950. We are not here concerned to examine the arguments, but to marvel at the strength of the tradition. For all authorities are agreed that the earliest version of the poem cannot be ascribed to a date earlier than 500 B.C., and the most recent conclusion is that "negative evidence in

India makes it improbable that any epic existed earlier than the fourth century B.C." Even if we adopt the latest conjectural date for the battle, the traditional material for the epic must have been handed on for some five centuries—a sufficient testimony to the marvellous memories of the Indian story-tellers and to the hold which the story of the Pandus and the Kurus has had upon the imagination of the Indian people.

And the tradition whether of *Mahábhárata* or of *Ramáyana* was surely a simple one, the outgrowth of those ancient sagas sung by the royal minstrels whose function it was to hymn the knightly deeds of their patron's line. We may hold, with Sir Rabindranath Tagore, that the origin of the Great War was not in truth a mere scramble for a little part of territorial sovereignty, but the clash of ideals, of the static ideas of the Brahmans, rooted in ceremonial observance and the Vedas and of the progressive creed of the warrior Kshatriyas whose life was movement and who were founded upon the social relations of man to man leading to the gospel of love. But farther than that we cannot go with him. Are we to read allegory into all these old sagas of the minstrels? Are we to believe that the hand of Penelope was only to be won by the true Teacher who alone could hit the gold of Truth with the bow of Conviction, not even to be bent by the multitude of false teachers? So do the thinkers of to-day read their own ideas into the stirring ballads of their forefathers, and in so doing destroy all their human interest.

For, in truth, the interest of these epic stories lies for us in the Indian conception of character.

And in studying the character of the Indian figures on the canvas we have to bear in mind the peculiarity of the Indian ideal. Rightly is Yudishtira the son of Dharma, god of Justice; to the European mind he seems to be the rather colourless leader of the type of Agamemnon,

a leader who is neither Commander-in-Chief of his own forces nor the outstanding warrior among them. His conduct in accepting the challenge to gamble and his recklessness in the actual match seem to modern readers inexcusable. But we have lately been reminded that Dharma is a wide term, including not only the ethical ideas of justice and righteousness but conformity in every detail with the code of honour and with scrupulous religious observance. To be generous and even lavish in gifts to Brahmans, to perform the sacrifices with due regard to the niceties of ritual, to accept a challenge which the knightly code forbade the King to refuse—these were acts of piety which took their place side by side with morality. The *Mahābhārata* indicates very clearly what are the qualities that befit a king. In these Yudishtira is thought to have excelled. They formed the supreme virtue. That is why at the last, when the brothers are taking the final journey that ends in the Heaven of Indra, he alone reaches the gates and is offered admittance when all the others must undergo the purification of Purgatory. That is why he is given the preference even over Arjuna, the sun-bright youth, the darling of Krishna, glorious in the splendour of perfect form, matchless wielder of the celestial bow which, like Roland's Durendal and Siegfried's Nothung, has received the special name of Gandiva. In strong contrast stands out the figure of Bhima, who flames through the world in ungovernable paroxysms of rage, kneading his victims into shapeless masses of flesh and drinking the heart's blood of the Prince who has insulted Draupadi. He it is who ends the war by breaking the thighs of Duryodhana, the leading Kuru, and characteristically he leaves his victim in his dying agonies on the field. Bhima and Yudishtira together represent the transition which was slowly going on as the epic took final shape; the one is the barbaric type of a primitive civilisation in which brute

force is the predominant quality, the other the gentler type of the more settled order when law is taking the place of mere physical strength and society is settling down on the lines of caste and the predominance of the Brahmans to be evolved into the India as we know it to-day.

That some kind of transition was going on is more strikingly shown in the puzzling figure of Krishna. For the *Mahábhárata* records a battle of mortal men, always of the heroic type but always human. The gods do not take part in it as Athene, Aphrodite, Ares, and indirectly Apollo fight for their respective sides in the *Iliad*. Krishna appears now as the warrior-king of Dwarka, who in the end pays the last human penalty, now as the blazing avatár of Vishnu who is above all mortal laws. The two lines of thought would seem to be distinct, but in the course of sectarian editing they have become so interwoven that it is hard to disentangle them. Krishna enters the war strictly as a non-combatant; he drives the chariot of Arjuna as Athene drove Diomed. But his advice on more than one occasion overstepped the bounds of the chivalrous code, and the later editors seem to have felt that such conduct did not conform to his divine character, for excuses, feeble enough to modern critics, are offered to cover up these lapses.

But the main ethical interest of the *Mahábhárata* is centred in that magnificent conception of the Hindu perfect man which has never been equalled in the whole range of epic poetry, the character of Bhishma. "Entbehren sollst du, sollst entbehren!" cries Mephistopheles to Faust; there are draughts of the cup of life which a man must forgo. Bhishma is the embodiment of active renunciation. He is not merely content to do without what cannot be had; he deliberately puts the cup of life from him. He renounces the world when, to avoid dissension, he yields the kingdom, his by right, to his half-brother; he renounces

the flesh when, lest dissension should spring up in the coming generation, he denies himself the chance of begetting a son, and how great was that sacrifice only a Hindu knows ; he renounces the Tempter when he remains loyal to the losing cause, and finally life itself since by a special gift of the gods he can choose the time of his own death. Wise in counsel, pure in life, loyal to friends and foes, valiant in fight, Bhishma the Terrible is in all epic poetry the one example of the "verray parfit gentil Knight."

And yet with this exception it is the treatment of the female characters that has for us the most abiding interest. In the Sutras a daughter is "a source of misery," and in later literature there are many contemptuous references to women, but these are of the earth earthy, soiled with the faults of everyday life. The women of the epics are held in the highest honour ; they are the ideals of womanhood of the same family as Beatrice Portinari. When Yudishthira gambles away kingdom, liberty, brothers and finally Draupadi, it is the last that is the bitterest sting of all, and it is because of the insult to her that Bhima wreaks such terrible vengeance on his foes. Filial piety—one of the greatest of all virtues in Hindu eyes—is exhibited equally to the mother as to the father, but the keynote of all female virtue is fidelity to the husband. In the two conspicuous cases of Sita and Damayanti a voice from heaven is needed to convince the doubting husband of his wife's fidelity, and Sita and Draupadi, Damayanti and Savitri are held up to our admiration as examples of the faithful wife accompanying her husband in his adversities and sharing his sufferings. More remarkable still is the ascription to the woman of the rôle of saviour. A great writer has reminded us that in Shakespeare it is the woman who saves the situation created by the man's folly. Is it strange or is it only the insight of genius that the same idea has been brought out by Vyasa, the reputed author

22 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

And perish utterly. I see, I see,
 Destruction come upon thee and thy house,
 Horror of darkness and the wrath of God,
 Weeping and grief and lamentation sore.
 Remember, Prince, how when Duryodhana
 Was born, a jackal screamed within the halls ;
 He is the jackal whom thou cherishest.
 Wilt thou give tigers for a jackal, or
 Peacocks for crows ? for so these Pándavas
 Transcend in glory all the Kuru lords,
 Send not thy princes to the dark abodes
 Of Yama : stay thine hand ; for even the high
 Gods cannot strive against these Pándavas.
 Let them depart, let them depart in peace
 And let this shameful play at dice be done.”
 But Dritiráshtra answered not a word.

But now the King, being stript of all his wealth
 And beggared by the wiles of Sákhuni,
 Cried in ungovernable rage, “ Base wretch,
 Unfairly hast thou won, and by thy guile
 Stolen our wealth ; yet is the victory
 Half won, for we are masters of our souls
 We brethren ; yet will I adventure this,
 And on the cast I stake our liberties.”

So once again the dice were thrown, and still
 The same triumphant answer, “ I have won.”
 Then spake in humbler mood Yudishtira ;
 “ Sir, we are now your slaves ; yet is there one,
 And that the choicest jewel of them all,

TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

THE DICE MATCH

AD and dejected in the Kuru halls,
With his four brothers sat Yudishtira,
Deprived of wealth and power and liberty.
Had chanced that Prince Duryodhana
On a visit to the Pándu realm
Seeing that their wealth and power were great,
Seized with envy and devised a plot
By to gather all unto himself.
On returning to his father's house
Messages : " Come now and see our halls,
Ordy halls which we have built, and play
Andly game of dice with us your friends."
When he heard, with doubtful mien the King
Said to the messenger and answered, " Sir,
It not. Who sent this message ? Who
Play with us ? " And he : " My message comes
From Dritiráshtra's self, and in his halls
Among gamblers is the Gandhava King,
Drona ; yet I counsel thee, be warned,
For here is guile beneath and base deceit,

And evil cometh of this dice-playing.”

Then swore the King that he would go and yet
Wholly refrain from dice; “but if,” said he,
“Sákhuni challenge me before the Kings,
Needs must I play, for so my royal word
Is pledged, nor can I then undo my oath.”

So journeyed they to Dritiráshtra’s realm
In royal splendour, and in friendly guise
Were greeted by the Kauravas; so passed
In pleasant talk the evening, and at night
They rested on soft couches to the sound
Of lutes and the sweet songs of singing girls.

And on the morrow, when the halls were set
And all the kings enthroned, Duryodhana
Cried, “Cousin, play a friendly match with me,
For I will stake much wealth, and Sákhuni
Will throw the dice.” But King Yudishtira :
“Let be; this gambling is a foolish sport :
For Kshatriyas victory or death in battle,
These count I worth the winning, either fate
Is glorious; but I count it as a sin
To filch from others by some base deceit
Their riches. Yet if thou hast set thy mind
Upon this game, I swore a royal oath
That I would not refuse. Enough! begin!”
So on the one side staked Yudishtira
A goodly chain of pearls, churned from the sea,
And on the other Lord Duryodhana
Cried, “Win these jewels if thou wilt.”

And so the dice were cast and Sákhuni,
Laughing a little laugh, said, "I have won."

Whereat the King, for a new lust of play
Ran like a fire through him and his eyes
Blazed with a flame of anger, cried aloud,
"Sir, you have won unfairly ; we will play,
And play, and play again till all be lost
Or won, for I will wager land and slaves,
Elephants and horses, all the boundless wealth
Of the kingdom, nay, the kingdom's very self,
Ere I will yield the victory." And he :
" 'Tis well," and once again the dice were cast,
Again and yet again, and at each throw
Came the triumphant answer, "I have won."

But anxious Vidura, whose unwilling hands
Had borne the message to the Pándavas,
For that he saw that ruin swift would come
Upon the Kurus for this happening
And fell destruction upon all the realm
Descend, implored the blind and aged King :
"Hear me, O King, be well advised ; for now
Thy reckless son, the Prince Duryodhana,
Will urge us on to ruin. For as men
Who gather honey on a dizzy height
And, wholly bent upon their quest perceive not
The imminent danger, till at last they fall
And perish, even so the Kauravas
Will fall into the dim abyss of death

22 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHĀRATA

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So once again the dice were thrown, and still
 The same triumphant answer, “ I have won.”
 Then spake in humbler mood Yudishtira ;
 “ Sir, we are now your slaves ; yet is there one,
 And that the choicest jewel of them all,

Our wife, our Queen, our fairest Draupadi.
Loth though I be to offer her as pledge,
Yet will I not abjure my kingly oath
And will maintain this contest to the end.
Play on, Sir King ! and for this once forswear
Thy guile ; in fairness let the dice be cast.”
So for the last time fell the fatal dice
And still the answer came, “ Lo ! I have won.”

Up sprang in triumph Lord Duryodhana ;
“ Now have we all, wealth, jewels, kingdom, slaves,—
Nay, the Kings’ very selves for bondmen—Go !
Fetch hither Draupadi,” and willing men
Ran to obey and haled the unwitting Queen
Before that high assembly of the Kings.

As when a flower of the woods has grown
In some cool glade beside a quiet stream
Quite overhung with ferns and creeping plants
And feels itself secure—anon a child,
Passing that way in innocent wantonness,
Pushes aside the friendly leaves and plucks
The modest flower, from its secret nest ;
Too soon it droops and all its loveliness
Is quenched and withered by the pitiless sun,—
So drooped before the Kings Queen Draupadi.

Loud laughed the insolent Duryodhana ;
“ Girl, you are now our prize ; the inconstant dice
Your wanton husband, Lord Yudishtira,
Have robbed of all his wealth—arms, jewels, lands,
His very kingdom—and now, last of all,

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You, the one priceless jewel in his crown,
His wife. Till late you were a princess, now
A slave ; your place is with the humblest drudge
Of all our serving wenches, and your task
Henceforth shall be the meanest of them all."

But she, the Queen, her garment all awry,
For those rude hands that dragged her to the hall,
Nor cared for woman's honour, hurried her
With hair unbound and garments disarranged
Before the Kings, now stood with downcast eyes
Burning with shame and with clear flame of anger,
And in a low voice spake : " O cruel Lords !
Is this your manly prowess that ye drag
A helpless woman naked to your halls
Where learned men and reverend elders sit
Godlike, to whom in happier days the Queen
Decked in her royal robes her due obeisance
Should render ? Will ye thus dishonour me ?
I tell you, lords, ye know not what ye do,
For if the high gods should descend from heaven
To help you, nay, if Indra's very self
Come to your aid, the wrath of these my lords
The Pándavas shall fall upon you, shall
Destroy you utterly, and on the earth
Your name shall be forgotten. Deep and wise,
Although to mortal men inscrutable,
Are all the ways of Dharma¹ ; though we see
Clear-sighted the affairs of men on earth,

¹ God of Justice.

Yet is our vision blinded by the light
Of his transcendent glory. Yet I find not
Wherein to blame my Lord Yudishtira,
Whose virtue ever seemeth in my eyes
To shine unspotted. Shame, ye Kuru lords !
Where is the ancient Kshatriya chivalry ?
Where is the boast of Bhárata, that thus
Ye silent sit and mock a hapless Queen ?
Tell me, I pray you (for Yudishtira
Hath staked my person, being himself a slave)
What power have slaves to do this thing, when all
Their goods are forfeit ? tell me then, I pray you,
Whether I be your lawful prize or no."

Thus ended she ; and, lifting up her eyes
Towards her husbands, shot one burning glance
That like a clear flame scorched their inmost hearts.
Not all the loss of their most cherished wealth,
Their kingdom, power, liberty itself,
Had pierced them like that glance ; in impotent rage
They watched what should befall, while Sákhuni,
Dushashana and Karna, Kunti's son,
Taunted the helpless Queen and called her slave.
And Bhima, seeing her most piteous case,
Rolling his eyes for anger cried aloud :
" This is thy doing, Lord Yudishtira.
Methinks these gamblers have within their halls
Slave girls and serving maids and courtesans
In plenty, yet they stake not woman's honour
Upon the fickle dice ; 'tis thou alone

Who having lost thy kingdom, brothers, wealth,
 Yea, thine own self, hast dared at last to stake
 Our peerless wife, our Queen, our Draupadi.
 Shame on thee, lord and brother ; for her sake
 Anger consumes me quite. Had I but fire
 I would destroy thee now with these my hands ! ”

But Arjuna because he saw that now
 They were delivered helpless to their foes
 And that hot rage betwixt them could avail
 Nothing, besought his brother soothingly :
 “ Nay, brother mine, such words do not beseem
 Us, seeing we are made a mockery
 Of these our foes. I pray you let us not
 Besmirch our lofty souls with bickerings.
 For King Yudishtira remembering
 His knightly courtesy, could not refuse
 A friendly challenge offered in good faith
 To outward seeming, though his mind misgave him.
 Forget not in blind anger the respect
 Due to an elder brother and a king.”

Meanwhile in the assembly strife arose
 And young Vikarna spake : “ The question, lords,
 I find not easy of a quick reply.
 Thus stands the matter. Lord Yudishtira
 Has staked his wealth, his brothers and himself,
 And lost them all ; so are they now become
 Our slaves to do with them as we desire.
 Can then a slave deprived of all his goods

Dispose of them ? For to the feet of kings
The gods have set four snares, the love of wine,
Hunting and gambling, and the lust of women,
And in the third of these this Pándava
Is taken ; yet he staked not Draupadi
Till he himself had lost his liberty.
Such stake I count not lawful, nor the Queen
Lawfully won. And thus I give my vote.”
And at his words a loud uproar arose
In the assembly ; some swore that he spake
Sooth, others that his words were foolishness ;
But springing up amongst them Karna blazed
In wrath : “ Boy, beardless brother of Duryod-
hana,
Child, that art fitter for the nursery, who
Art thou to teach thine elders ? Draupadi
Was won by fair decision of the dice,
The freewill offering of her husband here,
Who staked his wife upon the cast and lost :
And yet thou say’st she was not fairly won.
She is the wife of these five Pándu lords,
A thing abhorrent to the laws of God ;
For can a woman being virtuous wed
More than one husband ? Surely such a one
Lives in unchastity ; it matters not
If such be brought before the assembled Kings
Naked or clad. She is our lawful prize,
And yet thou say’st she is not fairly won !
Thy words are folly. Strip these Pándavas,

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Strip them, I say, the woman and the men
And we shall see then who is master here."

And at his words the Pándu princes, where
They sat in deep dejection, laid aside
Their upper garments, but Dushashana
In all unknighly fashion laid rude hands
Upon the shrinking Queen, to tear away
The one frail covering of her modesty.
But she in her most dire extremity
Thought upon Hari¹ the divine, and prayed :
" O save me, save me, Hari, from these men ;
Have mercy on my weakness ; for my soul
Is struggling in the waves of misery,
And the deep waters have gone over me.
Come, Krishna, come, for darkness overtakes me.
I fail ; I faint." And at her cry the god
In pity left his throne above and strode
Unseen to that assembly hall and so
Stood by the cowering Queen.

Meanwhile the Kurus
Dragged at her cloth, when lo ! a miracle ;
For when her single robe was torn from her
The unseen Krishna clothed her modesty ;
As often as each robe was plucked away,
Another veiled her form, till spite itself
Grew weary of the unavailing task,
And at the last the sullen Kauravas
Gave up the unequal contest, and the floor

¹ Krishna.

Was strewn with garments many-hued.

Yet still

The question was unanswered ; Vidura,
Skilled in religious doctrines and in all
The wisdom of the sages, rose and spake
Upbraiding them : “ O Kings, it is not meet
The question being asked, that we should sit
Silent, for unto learned men the Gods
Have given this gift, that in their hands they bear
The scales of justice and with certain voice
Pronounce the right ; for if ye silent sit
Knowing the justice of this cause, and still
Refrain from speech, the anger of the gods
Will fall upon you, being taken in sin.

The young Vikarna here hath given his vote
According to his judgment, right or wrong,
But ye say nothing. Sirs, it is not just :
Let us decide and quickly make an end.”

Yet even so unbroken silence still
Held sway amongst these lords, nor any dared
To give swift judgment on the question asked.
But Karna cried again : “ Dushashana,
Take thou this Draupadi, this serving wench,
This slave, and thrust her in among the maids
To do her tasks.” And nothing loth the Prince
Laid violent hands upon her ; but the Queen
Once more addressed her foes with trembling speech :
“ Sirs, I have come before you in distress.
I pray you now forgive me if in aught

30 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

I have forgot my duty ; well I know
 That in the company of learned men
 A woman should salute them, as is meet.
 This now I do and due obeisance make,
 Sirs, does it seem to you a little thing
 That I who only once before appeared
 In sight of men when as a modest maid
 I chose my prince at my swayamvaram,¹
 Should now be dragged before the assembled Kings ?
 This is not justice ; these my noble lords
 Suffered not sun nor wind to sully me,
 Yet now sit helpless. Where is then the fame
 And where the boast of Kshatriya chivalry ?
 I am the friend of Krishna and a Queen :
 I am the wife of King Yudishtira,
 Nor any less in blood than he. My lords,
 Give me your judgment quick, I do beseech you
 (I am tormented past my woman's strength),
 And tell me if I be a slave or no."
 And in the assembly once again arose
 A hot debate ; some said Yudishtira
 Must needs decide the fateful question, some
 That Arjuna and Bhima and the twins
 Must answer her, and still there was dispute
 When in the Homa Chamber of the King,
 Blind Dritiráshtra, sounded loud the cry
 Of jackals, added to discordant notes

¹ The ceremony at which in ancient times a girl publicly chose
 her bridegroom.

Of asses braying and the fearsome cries
Of wailing birds. A sudden terror fell
On all the learned sages, for they knew
The meaning of the portent, and they prayed
The King to save the race from endless woes,
And to avert the wrath of the high gods.
So at the last King Dritiráshtra spake,
Wishing to save his friends from uttermost
Destruction, and the rending of the realm :
“ O Queen, I praise not Prince Duryodhana
And those that follow him, for thou art chaste
As snow, and thine inviolate constancy
Hath won our royal favour. Thou art free ;
Ask what thou wilt ; it will not be denied.”
And Draupadi : “ I thank thee, royal sir,
That I am free ; this favour will I ask—
Set free my dearest Lord Yudishtira.
Let not my son, my Prativindya,
Be counted as the offspring of a slave ;
His blood is royal as thine own, but men
Will point and mock at him with cruel words,
‘ See there the mighty prince born to a slave,’
And so despise him.” But the King replied :
“ Thou askest but a little thing ; thy boon
I grant. Howbeit it shall not suffice,
For I do find it in my heart to grant
A second boon : thou shalt not ask in vain.”
Then cried the Queen : “ Release from slavery
The twins and Arjuna and Bhimasena

And give them back their weapons and their cars.”
 “ ’Tis done,” the King replied, “ yet ask again ;
 Such constancy as thine merits a third
 Gift, speak thy mind and it is given.” But she :
 “ Nay, my good lord, for I have heard it said
 That unto Vaisya men one boon is given
 And unto Kshatriya women only two.
 Therefore I ask no more, for these my lords,
 Having obtained their freedom by this grace
 Can carve their fortunes with their own right hands
 And with their upright hearts ; for not to power
 Alone do the high gods grant empery
 But unto justice, faith, and righteousness,
 And thus to righteous men they grant a sword
 To smite the wicked, and a flame of fire
 To purify the world of tyranny.”
 And Dritiráshtra answered, “ Go in peace.”

THE BIRTH OF SAKUNTALÁ

IT is well seen that unto mortal men
The ways of God are dark and to their ken
His paths mysterious ; He can bring to naught
A man of virtue, who by taking thought
Deemeth that he by manifold penance
Can take the kingdom of heaven by violence.
I rede you well, it is a little thing,
Certes, for him if Winter marry Spring
And from this union of flowers and snows
A maid be born as fair as any rose,
Whose praise for aye shall be in every mouth
From east to farthest west, from north to south.

There was a sage who Viswamitra hight,
Renowned for penances, and his delight
Was aye in fastings and austerities.
He prized not earthly fortune, and his eyes
Sought not the charms of women. So one day,
As through the forest paths he chanced to stray,
He spied a maiden, playing with her ball,
Of lovely countenance, and straight and tall.
So beautiful she was, there is no moon
As fair as she, nor any rose in June,
And, as she innocently played, a wind,

34 TALES FROM THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

Suddenly rising, caught her from behind,
 And unawares her airy robe was whirled
 Away, and, as she clutched at it, it curled
 Out of her reach. So in her purity,
 Naked and shining for all men to see,
 She stood abashed, while all her body fair
 Was softly kissed by the enraptured air.

This wind came down from Indra,¹ for he thought,
 "By this man's penances we shall be brought
 To none effect, and all the realm of heaven
 Shall fall away from us, and shall be given
 Unto this sage, unless we tempt him now
 To fall from virtue and to break his vow."
 Therefore he sent the wind, which like a dove
 Bore on its gentle wings the God of Love.

The hermit gazed upon her rounded hips,
 And marked the beauty of her pouting lips,
 And as he gazed a new-awaked desire
 Stirred the cold pulses of his blood like fire.
 He called to her; and in her nakedness,
 No longer mindful of her late distress,
 Obedient with salutation meet
 She came to him and touched his saintly feet.
 And so their troth was plighted. Swiftly passed
 The years in amorous dalliance, till at last
 Whenas her time was come, she sought the wild
 Himalayas and there she bore a child.
 And there she left the babe in a cool glade

¹ Zeus; cf. Imber.



And there she left the babe in a cool glade
By murmuring streams that babbled in the shade.



By murmuring streams that babbled in the shade,
And journeyed to Lord Indra's realm to tell
How she had done his will and all was well
With his celestial kingdom.

But the girl
Lay in her innocence like a costly pearl
Within its oyster, while the beasts of prey
Prowled round her cradle. Woe had been if they
Had found her lying thus ! Which when they saw
The vultures screened her from the hungry maw
Of forest-roaming beasts and from the sting
Of poisonous serpents in her down-lying ;
And so they kept their ward both day and night,
Guarding their infant charge from harm's despite.

Coming to bathe in streams Himálayan,
It chanced there passed one day a holy man
Of virtue great and great austerity ;
His name was Kánwa, an ascetic he,
And when he saw the babe upon the ground,
And all the vultures keeping guard around,
From that deep solitude he took the child
And bore her with him through the forest wild,
Back to his home ; and she became his daughter.
And, as time sped, she fetched him the sweet water,
She kept his house and eke she gave him food,
Tending him always as a daughter should.
Sakuntalá she had for name, because
The vultures guarded her with beak and claws.
Thus have I told the story of her birth,

38 TALES FROM THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

Which was begun in sadness, closed in mirth ;
But how a King's son took her for his wife
And how great trouble came upon her life,
That story I shall tell another day ;
But of her birth there is no more to say.

NALA AND DAMAYANTI

NALA, the King of the Nishadas, loved
King Bhima's daughter, Damayanti named,
So fair had rumour painted her : and she
Loved him again for all the excellence
Men's tongues had given him, though neither yet
Had seen the other face to face. One day
It chanced that Nala in his hunting caught
A golden swan, which, fluttering in the toils,
Begged for its life and cried in human speech,
" Spare me, O King, and I will fly away
To Damayanti, and will paint to her
Thy fame in living colours, so that she
Will not consent to take another lord
But only thee ! " And Nala let him go.
The bird, rejoicing in his liberty,
Soared to the flock ; and straight their course they
took
To Damayanti's garden ; there they saw
The maidens at their play, and cunningly
Drew them apart ; and Damayanti chased
The messenger of Nala, till they came
To a secluded bower where the bird
Told all the tale of Nala, how that he

40 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

Among the sons of men was matchless both
For fame and beauty, even as she herself
Was fairest maiden. So the God of Love
Possessed her, till her heart leaned out to clasp
His, and she paled with unfulfilled desire.

Then Bhima, seeing her disconsolate
And wasting with insatiable love,
Proclaimed the day of her swayamvaram
To all the princes round. The fame of it
Pierced to the courts of heaven, and the gods
Would vie with mortals for the maiden's love.
Down the slant air they rushed, and when they
touched

The earth, lo ! Nala met them, like the God
Of Love himself, and, seeing him, the gods
Entreated him to be their messenger.

"Yea," he replied, "right gladly : tell me now
Upon what mission ye would have me go !"

Then Indra said, "We be the gods of heaven,
Who for the sake of Damayanti's love
Have come to earth, and it shall be thy task
To plead our cause with her." "Spare me," he
cried,

"For I am bound upon the self-same quest,
And I would win fair Damayanti's love."

"Nala," they said, "thy word is given ; go,
And by our favour thou shalt pass within,
Unseen by men." So he departed thence

And passed within the palace till he came
Where Damayanti with her maidens sat,
Fair as a lotus on a tranquil lake
That opes its rosy lips to kiss the dawn.
Filled with amazement at the sudden sight,
The maiden cried, "Who art thou, noble sir,
That comest hither like the God of Love ?
How didst thou pass the palace gates unseen ?"
And he : "My name is Nala ; I am come
Upon the message of the gods : for they
Would win thy love, and by their aid I passed
The guardians of thy palace." Then she cried :
"Alas ! It is for thee, it is for thee
That I have summoned all the princes. Thou
Shalt be my lord ; I cannot wed the gods,
Nor any other mortal man but thee."
But he entreated her to ponder well
How that the prize was such as woman ne'er
Could hope to win—and how that love despised
Brought death to those who angered thus the
 gods.
So sought he to persuade, but she was deaf
To all he said, and, smiling through her tears,
She whispered, "Unto the immortal gods
Due reverence I make and offer prayer ;
But unto thee my mortal love is given.
Howbeit, that I fall not into sin,
Let them attend the assembly of the kings
And I will choose according to my right."

42 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

And Nala, thence returning to the gods,
Recounted how his embassy had sped.

I

So when the sacred lunar day arrived,
The auspicious hour of the swayamvaram,
The rulers of the earth were gathered there,
Hot with desire of Damayanti's love,
As countless as the snakes in Bhogavati,
Or as the tigers in the mountain caves.
Then, as the moon upon a quiet night,
Rises in splendour in a cloudless sky
And with soft radiance outshines the stars,
Fair Damayanti entered ; and in awe
Of her great loveliness was every voice
Hushed, and upon her every eye was fixed
Nor saw aught other than her perfect form.
But when the heralds had in order called
The roll of names illustrious, she discerned
Five suitors of a likeness so exact
No man could sever them ; and in her mind
Doubt followed doubt, as shadows in a field
Fly when the wind chases the clouds, and long
She pondered, saying, " This is he, or this ;
Or can it be that other ? For the gods
Have taken upon themselves the shape of Nala
And in my maiden mind I am distraught.

The sages say that the celestial gods
 Have special signs whereby we may discern
 Divine from human." So her mind was swayed
 This way and that till her resolve was fixed
 To ask assistance of the gods themselves.
 Then in her maiden modesty she spake
 With salutation and due reverence :
 " Immortal gods, have mercy ! I have vowed
 Since I received the message of the swans,
 That I would wed no other man than Nala.
 Yet am I now perplexed and cannot choose,
 Seeing before me in the self-same form
 Five kings. Be gracious, and respect my vow ;
 Let me not be forsworn : resume your shapes
 Divine, and of your pity show me which
 Is Nala, thus proclaiming to the kings
 How far are gods removed from mortal men."
 So the four gods, having compassion on her,
 Took once again their forms celestial,
 Which cast no shadows, neither was the dew
 Of mortal toil upon their brows ; and dust
 Soiled not the spotless wreaths about their necks.
 And so among them Nala stood revealed,
 And Damayanti cast upon his neck
 The fateful sign that chose him for her lord.

Whereat the prince, his bosom all afire
 With unexpected joy, said, " Fairest maid,
 Thy choice has fallen upon a mortal man,

44 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

Rejecting even the love of the high gods :
Therefore I swear to thee that evermore
So long as breath subsists and vital fire
Remains within my body, I am thine,
And wholly dedicate my life to thee.”
So plighted they their troth, and in due time
With rites befitting princes they were wed.

Now, as it chanced, the gods, returning home,
Met Dwapara and Kali in the way.
Lord Indra asked them, “ Whither would ye go ? ”
And Kali answered : “ I have heard it said
That the swayamvaram of Damayanti
Will be performed ; she hath enchanted me,
And so I go to claim a fitting bride.”
But Indra answered with a smile, “ Too late !
Thou lovest labour : that swayamvaram
Is finished now and Damayanti’s lord
Is Nala : we ourselves have witnessed it.”
But in the heart of Kali anger rose,
And, hissing out the words, “ How now,” he said,
“ Thou tellest me that this presumptuous girl,
Despising the celestials’ love, has dared
To make election of a mortal man !
Shall she not reap her just reward for this,
And suffer for her insult ? ” “ Nay,” they said,
“ What she hath done we suffered gladly. Who,
Looking on that most virtuous prince, would grudge
That she should choose him for her lord, for he

Is foremost of the kings of all the earth
 In truth, in justice, in austerities ;
 And like the gods, the guardians of the world,
 This prince doth live and reign pre-eminent.
 He who on Nala's head calls down the wrath
 Of the immortals, does but curse himself
 And seeks his own destruction ; he shall fall
 Into the bottomless pit of deepest hell,
 And there endure the torments of the damned.”
 And, saying thus, they left him.

But he cried

In rage ungovernable, “ Dwapara,
 I shall destroy this Nala, make an end
 Of all his boasted happiness, for he
 Hath stolen from me the bride I coveted.
 Henceforth myself will enter into him
 And drive him into evil deeds, while thou
 Shalt be at my right hand. By play of dice
 We take from him his kingdom and his wife,
 And leave him wretched, outcast and forlorn.”

And so they came to Nala's realm. Twelve years
 They nursed their malice, but could find no flaw
 Within that perfect prince, till in the twelfth
 It chanced that Nala, having washed his mouth,
 Performed the accustomed rite of evening prayer,
 Yet was not wholly cleansed, for by the law
 He is unclean who hath not washed his feet.
 And in an instant envious Kali found
 At last the longed-for opportunity :

46 TALES FROM THE MAHABHARATA

So slight the error was, decreed by fate
 To blast the course of Nala's happiness.
 Then he, by virtue of divinity,
 The vilest of the gods in Indra's realm,
 And meanest spirit, stirred up Pushkara
 To challenge Nala to a game of dice.
 And so the prince, because he was possessed
 By Kali, like a madman, whom the gods
 Deprive of reason, that he may himself
 Work out his own destruction, quickly lost
 His wealth, nor took the counsel of his friends,
 But played and played and lost as if some Fury
 Were urging him to ruin.

But at length

The anxious folk, in their perplexity,
 Approaching Damayanti, spake : " O Queen,
 We cannot tell what demon hath possessed
 Our mighty lord, beneath whose righteous sway
 We lived contented in the former years.
 But now some madness hath o'ertaken him
 Of late, and he will drive to headlong ruin
 Thyself, the realm, and us. Go, Lady Queen,
 Entreat the King to listen to our prayer."
 So she besought the King with many tears
 To give his faithful people audience
 And to forbear from play and save the realm
 From sheer disaster. But he heeded not,
 And, with the lust of play infatuate,
 Answered her not a word.

So at the end

This once so mighty prince stood destitute,
Being stripped of kingdom, lands, and wealth !

Then said

Pushkara, " See now, what is left to thee
Of all thou hadst ? Wilt thou upon a throw
Stake Damayanti ? " But his insolence
Pierced the great heart of Nala like a sword ;
He turned from him without a word, and stripped
The jewels from his person, one by one ;
Then, with a piece of cloth about his loins,
Went forth to exile, yet his noble wife
Forsook him not in this extremity,
But in a single robe attired, went
With him to share his lot and comfort him.
So passed they through the town, and no man
dared

To solace him or pay the homage due
Unto so great a King : for Pushkara
Proclaimed that he who should accost the King
Should suffer pains extreme : forlorn and sad,
They took their way through the unheeding crowd,
And reached the precincts of the royal town
That once was theirs !

Three days in evil plight,

With water for their only sustenance,
Naked and hungry, halted they, for none
Dared stretch a hand to help the fallen King,
So heavy hung the fear of Pushkara.

48 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

And on a day, as they together went
 To gather roots and fruit wherewith to stay
 The pangs of gnawing hunger, they perceived
 Some birds, whose plumage shone like finest gold,
 And like to burnished silver were their breasts.
 And Nala thought within himself, "These birds
 Shall be my food to-day, and I will take
 Their feathers for my wealth." Whereat he
 stripped

His only garment off, and skilfully
 He cast it netwise on the birds ; but they
 With single purpose rose into the air
 Bearing the cloth with them, and he was left
 In utter nakedness disconsolate.
 And from above there came a mocking cry,
 "O Nala, know us for those self-same dice
 Which vanquished thee and drove thee out, for spite
 Could not endure that thou shouldst still be lord
 Of so much wealth as would suffice to hide
 Thy nakedness." Thus they derided him
 With insolent cries, and flew away. But he
 Returned to where the Queen awaited him
 And spake, "O Damayanti, 'tis not meet
 That I should come before thee in this guise.
 For now my cup of misery is full,
 And I have drained it to the dregs. Those dice,
 Those evil dice, having assumed the shape
 Of golden birds, the better to deceive,
 Have stripped me even of my single cloth

STORY OF NALA AND DAMAYANTI 49

And left me naught wherewith to hide my shame.
 Follow not one on whom the wrath divine
 Has fallen. Yonder lie the Vindhya,
 There is the river called Payashini,
 And there the hermitage of many saints
 Where thou may'st find the fruits of the earth ; this
 road

Leads to Vidharba and thy father's house.
 Follow thou that and thou shalt dwell secure.
 And now farewell ! for ever fare thee well ! ”
 So spake the hapless Nala, and again
 Repeated all the story of her road
 In voice for sorrow strangled ; but the Queen,
 Dumb with amazement at his cruel fate,
 Listened as in a dream, and so burst forth :
 “ Forsake thee, Nala ? Leave thee here alone ?
 My heart stood still for terror when I heard
 Thy words. Forsake thee in thy misery ?
 How can I leave thee in the forest, spent
 With toil and fasting, naked and forlorn,
 A prey to savage beasts and savage men ?
 Leave me not, Nala ! When, outworn with toil,
 Thy soul is compassed round with black despair
 And bitter memory of happy days,
 Let it be mine to comfort thy distress.
 And wise men say that for an aching heart
 There is no medicine like a loving wife.
 Thou wilt not leave me ; even now thou saidst
 I should go hence unto my father's house,

50 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

And if it be thy pleasure let us go
 Together." "Nay," he cried, "I will not leave
 Thee thus, for rather would I yield my life
 Than I would suffer any hurt to touch
 Thy tender body. Come! let us depart,
 Yet to thy father's house I will not go.
 How could I bear, in utter nakedness,
 To seek thy father's house, where once I stood
 In splendour and admired of all?"

So they

In sadness took their weary road, until
 They reached a humble inn, and on the earth
 They laid them down to sleep, for hunger, thirst,
 And weariness had vanquished them; they craved
 For Nature's sovereign balm, forgetfulness.
 And so ere long the tender Queen, unused
 To endure the lashings of remorseless fate,
 Sank into blissful slumber. But no sleep
 Came to the wearied King; with anxious doubt
 He pondered long, revolving in his mind
 What best to do for him and her; for if
 The tender Queen should share his fortunes, how
 Could she endure to live that savage life?
 After long suffering in the forest, death
 Would surely overtake her, nor by thought
 Could they avert the inevitable stroke;
 But if he left her, haply she would find
 Her father's house and dwell in safety there,
 And on her road no living thing would touch

STORY OF NALA AND DAMAYANTI 51

The high-souled Damayanti, for the gods
 Would guard her going out and coming in.
 Yet he had sworn he would not leave her, sworn
 No hurt should touch her, by the constant love
 He bore to her. And had she not renounced
 All that life held of pleasant for his sake ?
 How could he faithless be, and leave the wife
 Who trusted in his honour ? So he mused ;
 And musing, while the wicked Kali still
 Governed his mind, resolve took firmer shape
 To quit the Queen he loved, when suddenly
 The shame of utter nakedness returned
 Upon him and he sought to cut the robe,
 Her single robe ; yet had not wherewithal
 To work his purpose. Having searched the inn,
 At last he found a sword, and shore away
 A goodly piece from off the robe, nor waked
 The sleeping lady. Then he turned to go,
 Yet even as he went returned again,
 So pricked he was that he should lose his faith,
 So strong the cords that bound him to his love.
 Thrice he essayed to go and thrice returned,
 Drawn by the magnet of his love ; at last
 He tore himself away like one distraught
 And rushed into the darkness, leaving her
 To the grim terrors of that solitude.

II

No long time after, from her grateful sleep
Fair Damayanti woke, and, gazing round,
In half-unconsciousness she whispered, "Nala."
But no one answered her—and suddenly
The horror broke upon her, and she cried
In accents agonised, "Come, Nala! Lord!
Where art thou, Nala? Nala, come to me!"
But answer came not from the empty air,
And all the rocks re-echoed only "Nala!"
And then she understood, yet could she not
Believe that Nala had forsaken her.
Hither and thither she ran disconsolate,
And "Nala," cried, "why dost thou break the vow
Thou swarest to me before the immortal gods?
Nay, if thou hidest, 'tis no time for jest,
And surely I can see thee hiding there
Among the trees. Wilt thou not answer me
When I do call?" And, sinking in the dust,
By agony of terror overcome,
"Alas!" she wailed, "it is not for my fate
I grieve, but thine. How canst thou live alone
With none to tend thee in thy weariness,
Thy hunger and thy thirst?" Then she arose,
Fierce anger mastering her mind, and cursed
The evil spirit who had wrought such ills,
That he should suffer tenfold greater pangs
And sorrow blast his life for ever. Thus

She wandered helplessly and ever cried,
“ Nala ! ” and still the empty air around
Mocked her, and all the hills re-echoed “ Nala ! ”

And as she wandered, lo ! a hungry snake
In search for food, espied her passing by
And seized her in its mighty folds. Ah ! then
Her tale would have been quickly told, when fate
Threw in her path a hunter, who with keen
Weapon delivered her. And so they stood
Speechless, she flushed and panting from her late
Peril, and he struck dumb with loveliness
That on this wise he ne’er had seen. At length,
Moved by the lust of passion, he approached,
But she, perceiving his design, burst forth
In anger uncontrolled : “ Immortal gods,
If I have never wavered in my love
For Nala, let the fire from heaven consume
This miserable man ! ” And, as she spoke,
The fire came down from heaven, and the man
Fell as a tree falls which the lightning strikes.

But Damayanti, seeking still her love,
Her vanished Nala, wandered painfully
Through forests of impenetrable night,
Anon divided by some fairy glen
Or grove of singing birds or limpid streams
That prattled through the glade, to lose themselves
Once more within the jungle’s dark embrace.
And as she wandered ever more she wailed,

54 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

"Where, where is Nala ? O ye singing birds,
 That scan the earth from heights cerulean,
 Say, have ye seen my Nala ? Where is he ?
 Tiger, thou king of all the jungle, come,
 Tell me if thou hast seen my love, or let
 Me be thy prey and end my wretchedness.
 Thou mountain peak, that standest sentinel
 To guard this country, know me for a Queen,
 King Bhima's daughter, wedded to a King.
 Thou standest watching with unsleeping eye
 The wide-spread champaign, tell me if thou canst
 Where, where is Nala ? Whither is he fled ?
 Alas ! They heed me not, they heed me not,
 And I must wander still uncomforted."

At length she chanced upon a hermitage
 Set in a bower of leafy woods and cool
 With delicate flowers and with running streams
 Wherein dwelt many sages of good fame,
 Clad in the skins of beasts, having renounced
 The world, who when they saw the Queen
 advance

With deep obeisance and humility
 Cried, "Who is this that comes, of exquisite
 Beauty ? The splendour of her presence seems
 To mark the goddess, or perchance some nymph
 Of wood or stream or mountain to our poor
 Abode hath strayed." And Damayanti said :
 "O saintly men of high austerity,
 No nymph am I of woodland or of stream,



Tiger, thou King of all the jungle, come
Tell me if thou hast seen my love, or let
Me be thy prey and end my wretchedness.

Nor yet a goddess from lord Indra's realm,
 But just a simple woman in distress.
 My name is Damayanti, Bhima's daughter,
 And wife to Nala, of Nishadas King,
 Who in an evil hour was beguiled
 To his undoing, and hath lost his wealth
 By fortune of the dice. Now he hath fled,
 And I am left to roam these fearful wilds
 In quest of him. And if it be in vain
 Soon will I seek that sweet and lovely death
 Which comes to souls in agony. Ah ! say
 If happy chance has shaped his wayward course
 To your secluded home ? " Whereat they said :
 " Hither he hath not come. Howbeit we,
 By virtue of the power that saintly lives
 Bestow, can give thee comfort, for we see
 The vision of thy lord restored to power,
 Ruling again in righteousness and purged
 Of his most grievous sin. Before his face
 His enemies fly discomfited ; his friends
 Crown him with praise ; and thou ere long shalt see
 Once more thy Nala." And immediately,
 The sages with their sacrificial fires,
 The hermitage, the grateful rivulets,
 The garden bright with many-coloured flowers,
 Vanished from sight and left her standing there
 Amazed as in a dream.

With better hope,
 Yet mourning still her love, she wandered on

58 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

Through dreary wilderness and cruel thorn
 That tore her tender feet, until she spied
 Hard by a cool and pleasant stream whose banks
 Resounded with the song of birds, a train
 Of merchants with their elephants and cars.
 These she approached, and in her madman's guise
 With hair dishevelled, travel-stained and pale,
 And clad in half her robe, she seemed to them
 An apparition of unearthly mien.
 Some fled at her approach, some mocked at her
 Or cursed with vile abuse, while others asked
 With kindlier intent, " Whence comest thou ?
 Who art thou, lady ? Art thou woman born ?
 Art thou a goddess or a mountain nymph,
 Or comest thou from that more awful brood
 Which men call Rakshasas ? Be what thou list,
 Protect our caravan and our poor wealth,
 And bless our journey hence." Whereto she said :
 " I am but a weak woman and the wife
 Of royal Nala, and in quest of him
 I wander here. Ah ! tell me, I beseech you,
 Have ye seen aught of him ? " They answered :
 " Nay,
 For since we entered these terrific wilds
 Where only tigers roam, and elephants,
 No mortal have we seen, save only thee.
 Come, journey with us ; haply thou shalt find
 Him whom thou seekest. To a distant land
 We go, the country of the Chedis' King."

So for a season Damayanti joined
 These humble folk, and after many days
 They came upon a cool translucent lake,
 Set round with fragrant grasses, and adorned
 With lotuses, inviting travel-worn
 And weary men to ease them of their toil.
 Here they resolved to rest a little while,
 Unloaded all their goods and pitched their camp ;
 But of a sudden at the deepest night,
 When men are wrapped in slumber, came a herd
 Of furious elephants, in wild stampede,
 And as some fierce tornado of the west
 Sweeps with its all-destroying breath through woods
 And hamlets, levelling all things with the dust
 And leaving desolation in its track,
 So charged those elephants upon the camp,
 And in one breathless moment ruined all.
 Ah ! then what panic rose among those men
 New wakened from their sleep ; with broken cries,
 They rushed in wild disorder to and fro ;
 " Save me, O save me ! " " Whither dost thou fly ? "
 " Nay, save thyself." " Collect those scattered
 gems."
 " Of what avail are jewels ? " " Look ! beware."
 " Flee to the forest." " Guard the caravan."
 And when the storm had spent itself there lay
 Bodies of men and camels on the ground
 Wounded or dead, the goodly merchandise
 Destroyed, and all the camp one hideous wreck.

60 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

Then the sad remnants of that grievous night
Took counsel on the cause of all their woes.
Some blamed the flight of inauspicious birds,
Some said that in the worship of the gods
They lacked in diligence ; but others cried :
“ 'Tis the accursed woman who hath come
With wicked purpose to our harmless camp
In guise uncouth and form ill-omened ; her
We count a Rakshasi ; upon her head
We call for vengeance : let her die the death.”
And Damayanti heard in fear and shame
And mused awhile : “ The anger of the gods
Is fallen upon me, that I should destroy
These generous friends who sheltered me. 'Tis I
Who by some unknown sin in former days
Have reft the kingdom from my hapless lord,
And wrought him all these countless ills.” And so,
With drooping form and downcast eyes, went out
Alone into the forest and the night.
And after many days she saw afar
The towers of some great city where the King,
The good Suvaha, reigned, and hasted her,
And, as the sun was setting, entered in.
Pale as the watery moon which through the clouds
Struggles to shine with dim uncertain rays,
Without a star to bear her company
(Far different from that glorious other moon
Which she outshone at her swayamvaram,
Shaming the stars), she dragged her weary feet

STORY OF NALA AND DAMAYANTI 61

With hair thrown loose, and wrapping close about
her

All that she had for garment, down the streets.
The boys, in wanton thoughtlessness of youth,
Hailed her as lawful prey for merry jests ;
And, thus escorted by the jeering crowd,
She reached the palace.

From her latticed room
Suvaha's mother looked upon the crowd,
And, spying Damayanti, sent her nurse
To bring her in. The willing dame obeyed,
But, struck with wonder at her loveliness,
Exclaimed : " What goddess in a guise forlorn
Comes hither to our city ? Who art thou
Whose beauty, like the lightning from the clouds,
Dazzles the eyes of all beholders ? Who
Art thou that comest in this grievous plight ? "
And Damayanti told them all her tale,
Yet named she none. Then said the Queen : " Alas
O gentle maiden, bide with us while ;
My men shall go and search the country round
For thy lost husband ; haply he himself
Will hither come. Stay but with us awhile ;
Him we shall find." And Damayanti said,
For still her heart was constant to her lord,
" Nay, noble Queen, I dare not stay, unless
Thou swear'st to me that never any man
Shall speak to me, or try to woo my heart
From his on whom my heart is ever set ;

62 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

Without him I would rather die than live."

"I swear," she said. Thus was the compact sealed,
And there for many days she dwelt with them
And eased her spirit of its deadening load.

III

Meanwhile King Nala, having left the Queen,
Strode through the forest in his blind despair,
Nor cared where fate might lead ; and as he went
Ever he thought on that forsaken Queen,
And cursed the spirit that had so beguiled
Him into sorrow. Suddenly a light
Reddening the sky far off appeared, and he
Hastened towards the place, and, drawing nigh,
Beheld a mighty fire, and a voice
Came from within : " Approach, nor be afraid."
Whereat the fearless Nala entered in,
And, plunging through the fiery rampart, found
The King of Serpents, lying in his coils,
Naga, who for some former sin endured
The Brahman curse, that he should helpless lie
Still as a stone within the fiery fence,
Until the day when Nala should release
His torment and restore him to the life
Which once he knew. With joy he cried : " At last,
O Nala, art thou come to free me ; take
Me up, for I am very light, and bear
Me hence, and thou shalt find thy due reward."
And, saying thus, the snake by magic art

Shrank to the bigness of a thumb ; the King
Lifted him gently from the ground and strode
Back through the fiery ring, until he came
Beyond the region of those scorching flames.
Then said the snake, "Advance and count thy steps."
And Nala did as he was bid, when lo !
The serpent bit him, and a wonder fell.
The snake once more assumed his human form,
And all his manly beauty fell away
From Nala. Seeing his bewilderment,
The serpent said : " I am Karkotaka ;
Be not afraid, for now in this disguise
No man shall know thee, who thou art ; henceforth
The evil spirit who hath wrought thy woes
Is doomed to dwell within thee and his frame
My poison shall infect, until at last
Enduring not the torment, he shall leave
Thee utterly ; and now I counsel thee,
Go to the city of Ayodhya,
And by the fancied name of Vahuka
Seek service with the King as charioteer ;
So shalt thou win his favour, that he teach
Thee all the lore of dice. Then shalt thou see
The wife whom thou hast lost, and thou shalt win
Thy kingdom and thy wealth, and reign once more
In righteousness and truth ; no ravening beast
Shall harm thee, nor the curse of Brahmanas,
And all thy foes shall flee before thy face.
And now I go my way ; yet will I leave

64 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

These two celestial robes of virtue strange,
For when the time is come think upon me,
Endue these magic robes, and thou shalt find
Thyself restored to thine own proper form."

So saying he departed ; but the King
Rejoicing went his way, and so at length
Came to the city of Ayodhya,

And there took service as the charioteer
Of Rituparna. There long time he stayed,
But still his thoughts on Damayanti dwelt,
And ever as he worked he sang this song,
Crooning it to himself in undertones :

" Where is the glory of the earth departed,
With thirst and hunger faint, with toil outworn ?
Hath she forgot her lover, the faint-hearted,
The false, who left her helpless and forlorn ?
Perchance some other man hath stolen her heart ;
Ah ! doth she turn to him to heal the smart ? "

And as he sang his fellow servants asked

" Who is the lady whom thou dost lament
So constantly ? " And Nala answered them :

" There was a wretch, who had to wife a lady
Blessed beyond all praise ; but he was false,
He left her in the forest, helpless, lone,
A prey to ravening beasts, while he himself,
Pursued by sorrow and remorse, now lives,
After long pain in ease unmerited.

But still the bitter memories of his wife,
That wife to whom he broke his plighted word,

And all she is enduring for his sake
 Sleeping and waking, haunt his every hour."

IV

Came to King Bhima evil tidings, how
 That Nala had been stripped of all his wealth
 And with his faithful wife was driven forth
 To exile. Thereupon he called to him
 The Brahmanas ; and strictly he enjoined them,
 With promise of rich gifts and many kine,
 That they should find the truant pair and bring
 Them back to him. So one who had to name
 Sudeva, after fruitless search, at last
 Came to the city of the Chedis' King :
 There in the palace hall a lady sat
 Of dazzling loveliness ; yet on her face
 Unearthly pallor sat, so that she seemed
 Like one new rescued from the gates of death,
 And wasted by the hand of suffering.
 And good Sudeva, looking on her, thought,
 " Surely this lady is not strange to me,
 For I have seen her in her maiden days,
 When as a child she played within the halls
 Of noble Bhima. Have I found my quest ?
 O radiant moon, that sufferest eclipse !
 O lotus lily, withered by the sun !
 O flowery lake, blasted and desolate !
 Have I then found thee out at last in grief
 For thy lost husband and undecked with gems ?

66 TALES FROM THE MAHABHARATA

Since to the noble wife a noble mate
Is her best ornament and fairest crown.
Ah me ! my heart is sore, when I behold
That face so marred with sorrow and that form
Wasted with suffering unmerited.
Then let the task be mine to join the twain
And make the rose of youth once more to bloom
Upon those cheeks ; so, when the wounds are healed,
He like the sun rejoicing in his strength,
And she like summer moon whose silver disk
Rideth in splendour in a starry sky,
Shall rule in righteousness the realm they owned."

Sure of his quest, the lady he approached
And thus addressed her : " Damayanti, Queen,
Know me for one Sudeva, whom the King,
Thy father, sent in quest of thee ; rejoice,
For all is well with him and with the Queen.
Thy kinsmen too are living, though their hearts
Are heavy with the sorrow of thy fate."
And Damayanti knew him for her friend,
And the great joy of seeing him once more
Opened the flood-gates of her tears. She wept,
And through the tears the eager questions came
About her home, her parents, and her friends.
But the Queen-mother, seeing that her maid
Was weeping at the news Sudeva brought,
Sent some to call him, and " How now," she said,
" Who is this lady's father ? Who is she ?
Why hath her husband thus forsaken her

STORY OF NALA AND DAMAYANTI 67

And whither is he fled ? Methinks, good sir,
 Thou knowest all the tale ; I fain would hear.”
 And good Sudeva answered : “ Noble Queen,
 This lady is King Bhima’s daughter, wife
 To Nala. By misfortune of the dice
 They, from their kingdom into exile driven,
 Went forth no man knew whither. Then our King
 Summoned the Brahmanas, and straitly charged
 That we should find them. So for many days
 And over many lands in fruitless search
 We wandered. At the last I hither came
 And found her in thy halls. I knew her form ;
 I knew the birth-mark, which, though soiled with
 dust,
 Shines on her forehead like the crescent moon.
 Her name is Damayanti called, of all
 Maidens the loveliest ”—more he had said,
 But she in haste wiped off the soiling dust
 From the maid’s brow and saw the mark and cried :
 “ O Damayanti, art thou then the child
 Of good King Bhima, and I knew it not ?
 I am thy mother’s sister, her I nursed
 When in our father’s palace thou wert born.
 This house and all within it are as thine
 Henceforth ” ; but Damayanti answered low :
 “ Here have I stayed awhile in happiness
 And quiet, noble lady, by thy grace.
 But now, if thou wilt show me favour still,
 Send me, I pray thee, to my father’s house.”

V

So in due course she left that friendly land
 And journeyed home, whereat her kinsmen all
 Rejoiced exceedingly, and praised the gods
 That after tribulation she was come

Again to them. But Damayanti said,
 Gnawed by the canker of unending pain :
 " Mother, ere long I shall be bride to death
 If Nala come not. Do you now entreat
 My father to send out his messengers
 To search in every place until they find him."

So the King listened to her, and she sent
 To call the Brahmanas and said to them :
 " Friends, ye are going on my quest to find
 King Nala ; therefore in the crowded streets
 Where men do most assemble, ye shall chant
 This song. Howbeit have a care no man
 Doth know 'twas I who taught you this device :

" Gambler, beloved, how couldst thou forsake me
 Clad in a garment that was half mine own ?
 Didst thou not know that fear would overtake me
 As through the wilds I wandered all alone ?

" Come back, beloved, for my heart is yearning
 To see thy face, to fall upon thy breast,
 And grief consumes me like the fire fiend, burning
 The windy forest, while thou lingerest."

“So it shall be if any answer you
That ye shall note what manner of man he is,
Where he doth live, and whether he be rich
Or poor, and tidings shall ye bring me here.”

So after weary search a Brahmana,
Parnáda called, returned and cried: “O Queen,
I bring you tidings. In my journey I
Came to the city of Ayodhya
And sang the song thou badest me, before
The noble Rituparna and his court.
Yet were the monarch and his courtiers
Silent, but afterwards there came to me
One Vahuka, a groom or charioteer,
And spake with many tears these riddling words :
‘Pure women who are fallen on evil times
Or whom their husbands have forsaken, guard
Their honour ; neither will they cherish wrath
Against them.’ ” And, with this, he fell awhile
To musing. Then, ‘This lady of thy song,
She will not nourish wrath against the man
Whose only covering was carried off
By birds.’ And so broke off ; then eagerly
With rising breath he cried, ‘She is not wroth,
Not wroth with him who had endured the stroke
Of bitter fortune. Nay, though she suffered much,
She cannot still be wroth with such a one.’
And so he left me, and I hastened back
To tell my tale.” But Damayanti heard

70 TALES FROM THE MAHABHARATA

With parted lips and eyes suffused for joy,
And breaking in upon him, "Friend," she cried,
"'Tis he! Thou sawest him? Ah! cheat me not!
Thou couldst not be so cruel. Nay, 'tis he!
How looked he? Was he pale or worn?" nor
stayed

For answer, but on wings of ecstasy
Running within with laughing tears cried "Mother,
O mother, they have found him! Harken now,
Send good Sudeva to Ayodhya
And let him say to Rituparna thus :
'The lady Damayanti, knowing not
Whether her husband be alive or no,
Bids me proclaim a new swayamvaram.
To-morrow she will choose a second lord.'
And so the King will come and bring with him
The fancied Vahuka, his charioteer,
My Nala."

Thus befell it; for the King,
When he had heard the news Sudeva brought,
Called Vahuka and bade him bring the steeds
For he would presently a journey take
To Damayanti's new swayamvaram.
And Vahuka with downcast eyes obeyed,
Revolving in his mind these bitter news.
"Fickle is woman's heart," he mused, "for she
Hath wearied of her love for me, and now
She seeks another lord. Ah! cruel fair,
That trifled with man's love! Yet what of *me*?

What of my guiltiness ? Wherein have I
 Room to complain that have so greatly sinned ?
 Yet stay ! perchance this new swayamvaram
 Is but a new device which for my sake
 She hath devised to bring me back to her.
 So will I put it to the proof." And swift
 He yoked the horses ; lean they were of limb,
 And Rituparna chided him : " How now,
 Why hast thou brought these worthless steeds, to go
 On a far journey ? Of a truth, Sir Knave,
 They cannot reach their goal before the dawn
 Rises on Bhima's city." " Nay," he said,
 Patting the horses' necks the while, " I swear
 Before the earliest arrow of the sun
 Shall strike the towers, I will carry thee
 To Bhima's halls." So they departed thence,
 And under Nala's guiding hand they flew
 Swift as a bird flies, over hill and dale.

It chanced that, as they journeyed, on the way
 They saw a leafy tree with laden boughs,
 And Rituparna bade them stay awhile :
 " Now will I show my power," he said, " for some
 Excel in this and some in that, but none
 Are wise in all things. On these branches twain
 There are five million leaves, and from the tree
 The fruits that fell are greater by one hundred
 And one than those that hang. Upon the tree
 There yet remain two thousand and ninety-five."

72 TALES FROM THE MAHABHARATA

And Vahuka replied : " Such lore as this I know not. Let me now cut down the tree, And I shall count." But Rituparna : " Nay, For if we tarry long, the sun will rise Ere yet our road is finished. In this thing I am well skilled, and in the lore of dice." Whereat the heart of Nala leapt when he Recalled the promise of Karkotaka, And he implored the King with trembling prayer, " Ah ! royal Sir, teach me that lore of dice, And I will give thee all the skill I have In taming horses." But the King replied : " Take thou my knowledge of the dice, but yet (I am in haste to get this journey done) Thy skill of horses shall remain with thee Until I need it." And immediately The evil spirit Kali left the frame Of Nala, miserably rent and sore Tormented by the poison of the snake, And grovelled saying : " Spare me, mighty King, For I have suffered things unspeakable Since Damayanti cursed me in the wild. Now, I beseech thee, let me find repose Within that tree that cumbereth the ground." He answered " Go ! " and instantly the tree, With all its leaves and fruit, was withered up When the black soul of Kali entered in.

VI

Such was the speed those goodly horses had
They reached the city ere the night was fallen,
And loud the chariot rattled o'er the stones.
And Damayanti, where she sat alone
Thinking of Nala, heard the sound of wheels,
And as with ears a-strain she listened, cried :

“ I hear a chariot that speedeth fast,
Thus doth my Nala drive and only he.
Be still, my heart ; the night of grief is past,
And a new dawn is breaking over me.

“ As some poor wanderer in the desert drear
Is faint for thirst, I faint to see his face,
After the night of bitterness and fear
To feel him nigh, to die in his embrace !

“ Come, my beloved, that canst do no wrong,
Of crystal purity and stainless faith !
Come, my beloved ; I have waited long,
And in thy presence I am safe from Death.”

So in her joy she left the latticed room
And leaned upon the balcony, to see
Who drove the car, yet could she not discern
Nala among the travellers, for still
The magic of Karkotaka prevailed.
Meanwhile the King alighted from the car
And Bhima greeted him with honour due.

74 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

But Rituparna marvelled when he saw
 That nothing was made ready for the day
 Of the swayamvaram, nor Brahmanas
 Were there nor any kings ; nor was there speech
 Of festival toward. And Bhima too
 Was puzzled at the unexpected sight
 Of Rituparna, for, he thought, no man
 Will travel over weary leagues for naught.
 Yet showed he him his knightly courtesy
 And bade prepare the guest-chamber, " for now,"
 He said, " thou must be weary, lacking rest."
 So passed they in ; but Damayanti watched
 Where the King's grooms were rubbing down the
 steeds,

Yet saw not Nala. Then she called her maid,
 And said : " My mind misgives me, Keshini ;
 Whose was the car that rattled o'er the stones ?
 Something within me whispered ' Nala comes,'
 And at the thought my bosom leapt for joy,
 Yet see I not King Nala. Go you now,
 And ask of that ill-favoured groom who sits
 Beside the car, repeat to him the song
 I taught the Brahmanas, and bring me back
 His answer." So the obedient handmaid went,
 And Damayanti watched what should befall.
 Approaching Vahuka, the maiden said :
 " Whence comest thou ? and wherefore art thou
 come ? "

He said : " We come because my master heard

Of Damayanti's new swayamvaram.
 And he that came with us is charioteer
 To righteous Nala. That ill-fated King,
 After he lost his kingdom, came to dwell
 With Rituparna." "Whither hath he fled?"
 "Nala is known to Nala; to none else
 Doth he reveal himself; about the world
 He roameth all alone in dismal guise,
 And no man knoweth whither." Then she cried:
 "Didst thou not hear the song the Brahmans sang:
 'Gambler, beloved, how couldst thou forsake me
 Clad in a garment that was half mine own?
 Didst thou not know that fear would overtake me
 As through the wilds I wandered all alone?
 Come back, beloved, for my heart is yearning
 To see thy face, to fall upon thy breast,
 And grief consumes me like the fire fiend, burning
 The windy forest, while thou lingerest?'
 What didst thou say? My lady fain would hear."
 He said: "Pure women fallen on evil times
 And by their lords forsaken guard their honour,
 Nor cherish wrath. This lady of thy song
 Will never nourish wrath against the man
 Whose only covering was stolen away
 By wicked birds. She is not wroth with him
 Who hath endured the stroke of cruel fate."
 With that he bent his head in anguish sore
 And bitter tears; but the maid hastened back
 And told her lady all these things. Then she:

76 TALES FROM THE MAHABHARATA

"Go you again, my faithful Keshini,
 And watch how Vahuka demeans himself.
 If he be very Nala, as I think,
 Thou wilt discover something of divine,
 Or something human that betrays the King.
 But be not over-quick to give him all
 He asks, the better to fulfil thy quest."
 The willing maid departed on her task,
 Nor tarried long, but running back exclaimed,
 Wide-eyed with wonder : "Tidings, lady Queen ;
 Judge whether this be Nala, for the earth
 Opened her mouth to let him pass, the pots
 Wherewith he cooked, with water filled themselves,
 And the dry grass he lifted to the sun
 With fire was smitten. Last, a splendid flower
 Which with his hand he gently pressed, remained
 Uncrushed and shed a sweeter fragrance round.
 And then I set his children on his knee,
 Those children whom he had not seen since thou
 Didst send them hither lest they suffer harm
 When Nala lost the realm. 'Alas !' he said,
 'Twin jewels such as these two little ones
 Shone in my crown of marriage.' And he wept."
 Then Damayanti ran within and cried :
 "O mother, give me leave, for Vahuka
 Is Nala ! Let him come to me alone,
 That we may see each other face to face
 And prove our time of trial." So he came ;
 And for a space a mournful silence held

Them both, at this so strange reunion.
At last she spake ; “ Friend, hast thou ever known
A man his wife abandon, while she slept ?
Nala alone could do this thing. Wherein
Have I offended ? Did I not reject
For him the love of the immortal gods ?
And where is now the vow which he hath vowed
That he was mine for ever, I was his,
And we should never part ? ” The pain of it
Quite overcame her and she wept, but he
Answered her half in anguish, half in shame :
“ When maddened by the dice I cast away
The realm and when I left thee in the woods,
It was not I, but Kali’s wicked soul
That then possessed me ; these three weary years
He dwelt within my body like a fire,
But now the evil spirit is cast out
Of me, and therefore am I hither come.
Art thou then faithless ? for a rumour flies
That thou wilt hold a new swayamvaram,
Wilt choose a second lord in Nala’s place.”
Then she, in fear lest chance should sunder them,
Cried with a loud and bitter cry : “ Ah ! no,
For I am true to thee ; I cannot live
Without thee ; messengers we sent afield
To search thee out, and one returning brought
Tidings that he had found thee in the halls
Of Rituparna. This device I planned
To bring thee hither. Thou all-seeing air

That movest round the world continually,
 Thou mighty sun that governest the sky
 By day, beholding all the deeds of men,
 Thou silver moon, that dwellest in the hearts
 Of every creature, be my witness now
 If ever I have sinned against my lord.
 Let the three gods, the guardians of the worlds,
 Bear witness to my tale, and if I speak
 Not sooth, let them destroy me utterly."
 Whereat the awful voice of Vayu fell
 From heaven, saying : " Nala, take thy wife !
 Who during these three years hath guarded well
 Thine honour. We, the gods, do testify
 'Twas for thy sake that she hath nobly planned
 This high device of the swayamvaram,
 Hoping thereby to win thee back to her."
 And therewithal celestial flowers fell
 From heaven and music of the gods was borne
 Upon the breeze. So Nala, freed at last
 From that black shade that darkened all his life,
 Put off the garment of his servitude,
 And, thinking on the words the serpent spake,
 He donned the magic robe and so stood forth
 Before her, Nala's self.

VII

What need to tell
 The gladness of their meeting, how their grief
 Became intolerable joy, and how

King Bhima and his folk rejoiced with them ?
 Only on Rituparna hung a cloud
 For shame that he had held in thrall so great
 A King. But Nala spake, consoling him :
 “ Nay, gracious monarch, how could I reproach
 Thee, who hast succoured me in my distress,
 Whose house was as a harbour to a ship
 After long tossing on a stormy sea ?
 Depart in peace and take with thee thine own,
 The skill in taming horses which I had.”

Clad in his royal robe, King Nala rode
 Back to the city which had cast him out,
 Stript of his wealth, friendless and desolate,
 And all the folk rejoiced exceedingly
 That he was come, for Pushkara had laid
 A heavy hand upon them ; but he strode
 Straight to the palace of the King and cried :
 “ Now have I come to play another bout
 Of dice with thee ; for honourable men
 Grudge not to stake what they have lightly won.
 I stake my life, my liberty, and all
 Against the realm ; nay, Damayanti's self
 I throw into the scale, or if thou wilt
 And the dice like thee not, I challenge thee
 To single fight.” And Pushkara replied
 Mockingly, for he thought the prey was now
 Delivered into his ignoble hands :
 “ Gladly I take thy challenge—and thy wealth !

80 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

I count thee fortunate that once again
 Thou hast thy Damayanti, and myself
 That she shall pass to me, bedecked with gems
 And shining like the heavenly Apsarasas ;
 My heart is now, and shall be, hers alone.
 To-day thy wife, to-morrow she is mine ! ”
 And Nala, with his heart afire to smite
 His head from off him, smilingly replied :
 “ Let us begin then ! ” So the dice were thrown,
 And at that single cast King Pushkara
 Lost kingdom, liberty, and life itself.
 Then Nala said : “ Now is the kingdom mine ;
 Thy very life is forfeited. Yet know,
Thou didst not take the realm from me, for thou
 Wert but the tool of Kali ; I forgive
 (Surely thou art my brother) all the wrong
 Which thou hast done to me. I grant thy life.
 Henceforth betake thee to thine own domain,
 And may thy days be prosperous. The love
 I bear my brother shall not wane.” With that
 He lovingly embraced the fallen King.
 Thus courteously was Pushkara dismissed.
 No long time after Nala sent an host
 With honour to escort the Queen, and all
 The citizens rejoiced to welcome back
 Fair Damayanti. And the realm had peace.

THE DEATH OF BHISMA

SO through the field the battle roared, and men
Fought hand to hand, not in due order ranged,
But horse to man, and car to elephant,
In one red ruin, while the thirsty earth
Drank up the blood of thousands. But amongst
them

Bhisma the valiant, the indomitable,
Flamed like a fire through the hosts, and none
Might stand against him. Countless souls he sent
To the dim shades of Yama, till at length
Great Arjuna, the peerless archer, bent
His bow against the aged warrior,
And for a space, as clouds obscure the sun,
So Ganga's son by the unending rain
Of shafts stood hidden from the sight of men ;
Yet was he not subdued, but turned aside
That fiery stream as if in sport, and laughed.

But fiercer grew the fight, and warriors
In hordes assailed the aged hero ; he
Chose out a bow, but Partha's deadly shafts
Cut it in twain. Another and yet another
He took, but the unerring archer's hand
Splintered them all. At last he took a lance

82 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

Of wondrous toughness and well balanced, which,
As it flew quivering through the startled air,
Fell into fragments, shattered like the rest.

And Bhishma, seeing that some power divine
Upheld the unerring hand of Arjuna,
Paused from the fight and stayed his hand and
mused :

“ Methinks that I with mine own single hand
Could slay these insolent Pándavas, were it not
That the omnipotent Lord Krishna aids
His chosen favourites in the fight. But now
With that most powerful aid which he bestows
They are inviolate. Nor shall it be said
That Bhishma ever stretched his bow against
Sikhandin, woman born but now a man.¹
In far-off days, when my great father won
The peerless Kali for his bride, and held
High festival within his royal halls,
It chanced that he was pleased with me, and
gave

Two gifts : that I should be invulnerable
In battle, and again that I should choose
The hour when I should quit this lovely world.
To-day the hour is come ; I choose to die.”

And at his words a voice from heaven fell :
“ Desist from battle, favourite of the gods ;
As thou hast said, so be it unto thee.

¹ Sikhandin, having met a genie in the forest, exchanged sexes with him at his request, and thereafter remained a man.

Such is the will of heaven." And a breeze
Fragrant with heavenly odours blew, and shed
Flowers from the skies, while on its gentle wings
Was borne the music of the immortal gods.

But fierce around the mighty hero raged
The fight, and first Sikhandin wounded him,
The woman-warrior, and after him
Vibhatsu and the Pándu warriors,
Yet could they not subdue that mighty arm
Nor slay the aged chief. But Arjuna,
Holding before him as a shield Sikhandin,
In guile, for well he knew that Bhisma's bow
Would not be bent against that woman-form,
With three sharp hidden arrows cut in twain
That bow, and with one fiery line of shafts
Pierced the great hero's self. And Bhisma said :
" These shafts that come in one unbroken line
And smite me with the force of thunderbolts,
Piercing my very marrow, these are not
Sikhandin's arrows, but the hand of Partha
Directs them ; as the blast of winter cuts
The shivering kine, these arrows pierce my soul."
Then with one mighty stroke he hurled a lance
At Arjuna, but in mid air the lance
Was shivered by the hand of Partha's son,
And all men stood and wondered. But the
foes
Rushed in their hundreds on the warrior,
And as the sun went down illustrious Bhisma

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Pierced through and through with mortal wounds,
sank down

Upon the bloody earth, yet touched it not,
So close did stick the arrows in his flesh,
Making a couch fit for a Kshatriya.

And as a desert lion parched with thirst
Ranges afar in search of some cool spring
Whereat to drink—he stops and snuffs the air,
Then, without pause, he hurries to the pool
And bends his head, nor knows that close at hand
The hunters lurk, until with one sharp stab
The fatal arrow strikes him in the flank.
Stung with the pain he looks around and sees
A ring of iron closing in upon him ;
And gallant to the last he falls and dies,
Pierced through with many darts. So Bhishma fell,
And at that mighty fall the affrighted earth
Trembled and cried aloud ; the waterspouts
Of heaven were opened and the rain poured down
From the black thunderclouds.

But far away
Sat Ganga in her Himalayan home,
Ganga, from whom the hero sprang, nor wept
When she beheld her dying son, but sent
Great Rishis to him like a flock of swans
To comfort him. Down through the tremulous air
They flew, until they came where Bhishma lay
And marvelled at his dying, whispering
Among themselves, “ Why should this hero die

While yet the sun is in the south ? ” But he :
“ Nay, gentle swans, the boon my father gave
Is that I choose the hour of mine own death,
And, till the sun in his diurnal course
Has moved into the north, I choose to live.”
And so lay back upon his arrowy bed
Dumb, for the pain of his most grievous wounds
Ran through his dying limbs like liquid fire.

And for a space upon those mighty hosts
A silence fell and deep amazement, whilst
A pall of darkness overspread the sky
And hid the sun ; earth, from her innermost
depths,

Groaned when she saw the foremost of them all
Lopped like a tree and fallen along the ground.
And kings and warriors in their hundreds came,
Their armour all put off, in homage meet
And reverence to the dying ; even so
Do the gods reverence Indra, Lord of all.

Then Bhishma spake with faint and feeble voice :
“ My head is heavy, and I would that one
Brought me a pillow.” Swift they hastened them
And brought him pillows of the softest down
Whereon to lay his head ; of purple silk
They were, and brodered with the cunning arts
Of Hindustan. But he thrust them aside,
Yet with a gentle smile, saying, “ Alas !
These are not fitting for a Kshatriya’s bed.
Let those who sit at home with women lie

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Soft, while around the strains of music lull
 Their feminine spirits. Where is Arjuna ?
 Come, mighty archer, be thou son to me
 (For unto thee alone of all these Kings
 Is given the secret of a hero's death),
 Give me a pillow for my dying head
 Not unbecoming this my latest hour ;
 Thine be the choice ; thou wilt not fail me."

Straight

Lord Arjuna took up the peerless bow,
 Gandíva, purified with many rites
 And incantations many ; swift he shot
 His lightning shafts beneath the aged head
 That hung so heavy ; till at last the pile,
 Shot with a skill no other man could match,
 Had made a pillow for the dying Bhishma ;
 And with a sigh he sank back satisfied,
 Whispering, " In truth thou hast divined my
 thought ;
 Such pillow well beseems a Kshatriya
 Who all his life has walked uprightly, not
 Transgressing the immortal laws of God,
 Keeping his body stainless from desire
 Of carnal lust. Hadst thou devised aught else,
 I would have risen and cursed thee in my rage.
 Behold, O Kings, this that Lord Arjuna
 Hath done, for here upon my arrowy bed
 I rest contentedly, until the sun
 Enter the region of Vaisrávana.

Then comes the hour supreme ; that fatal hour
Shall teach you how a Kshatriya ought to die."

So spake the dying Bhishma and was ware
How that physicians crowded round his couch,
Eager to proffer help ; well skilled were they
In all the healing art, and could assuage
The fiery anguish of the rankling darts ;
But he once more : " I have no need of these ;
For I have left all earthly things behind,
And now my soul, fixed on the Infinite,
Ascends to heaven, to the blessed gods.
Reward them well and let them go."

But now

The sun was setting and the heroes all
Departed each his several way, while night
Fell on the silent plain and in the vault
Of heaven the myriad stars stood sentinel,
And Bhishma on his couch was left alone.
But in the Pándu camp high festival
Was held and great rejoicing that their foe,
The indomitable Bhishma, was o'erthrown.
Lord Krishna spake to King Yudishtira :

" Your enemy has fallen ; by the grace
Of the immortal gods thus it hath chanced,
Or is it that your soul-devouring eyes,
O mighty warrior of the Pándavas,
Have slain what else to mortal weapons were
Invincible." Then said Yudishtira :
" Not by the might of my devouring glance,

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Nor by the grace of Fortune, have we slain
 The foremost Kaurava. 'Tis thou alone,
 O Kesava, through whom the victory
 Cometh ; for thou, divinest Madhava,
 Art our sure refuge and our tower of strength.
 Thou smilest, Krishna, and lo ! victory
 Sits on our banners ; and, dost thou but frown,
 Defeat and dire ruin overtake us."

So passed the night in joy and revelry
 Throughout the Pándu camp ; the Kauravas
 In deep dejection and in grief cast down
 Sought brief forgetfulness in sleep. The morn
 Broke, and the hero on his arrowy couch
 Greeted the rising sun. Anon there came
 Warriors of either camp to greet him ; as of old
 Before the breath of all-devouring war
 Had blasted all the land, and in their souls
 Kindled a hate implacable, they spoke
 In words of peace and friendship, while they vied
 In doing honour to the son of Ganga.

But he, his body with the burning pain
 Consumed and clammy with the dews of death,
 Whispered : " My soul is faint and parched for
 thirst ;

Bring me some water." And they brought it him,
 Cool water in a golden jar, and choice
 Meat for his soul's refreshment ; but he said,
 Thrusting them all aside, " It is not thus
 I would have water ; these are for the sons

Of men, who linger here on earth, while I
Lie here expectant of the moment when
I pass from earth to seek the abodes of heaven.
Go, bring me Arjuna." And Pritha's son,
With deep obeisance and humility
Approaching him, bowed down and gently asked :
" What wouldst thou have me do ? " " My son,"
he said,
" My soul is parched with raging thirst and fire
From thy most potent arrows eats me up.
'Tis thou, O peerless archer, thou alone
That canst assuage my anguish with cool streams
Of water fitted for a prince's lips."
Forthwith the son of Pritha bent his bow,
Gandiva ; like a thunderclap it twanged,
And all around him quaked for fear. But he,
Pacing in due mysterious measure round,
Fitted a puissant arrow to the string
And shot into the earth a little space
From Bhishma's couch ; and suddenly there gushed
A stream of fragrant water, pure and cool,
Like to the nectar which the gods enjoy.
And at that marvel all men stood amazed ;
But Ganga's son, quenching his fiery thirst
At the cool limpid water, thus addressed him :
" O Arjuna, delight of all the world,
To whom is given, with Vasudeva's help,
Such power in archery as none beside
May match, henceforth thy powers shall be such

As the high gods would envy. For as man
 Among all living things, as Garuda
 Among the birds, or as the glorious sun
 Among the lesser luminaries of heaven,
 So thou among the warriors of this age
 Art without peer. And now I go my way,
 Yet would I fain give counsel once again
 To those whose eyes are blind, whose ears are deaf
 For now in this mine end I surely see
 Destruction overtake Duryodhana
 And all the myriad Kings with him allied.
 I have lived my life and on this battle-field
 Have found befitting death : but you, my friends,
 Live on henceforth in peace and amity,
 And let the blood of Bhishma be the seal
 Of lasting friendship. Why should these men perish
 In bloody strife ? Do thou, Duryodhana,
 Give half thy kingdom to the Pándavas ;
 So shalt thou earn the praise of righteous men,
 Nor feel the shame that for thy selfish ends
 Myriads of men are doomed ; then shall there
 come
 The reign of peace and of prosperity,
 Father embracing father, brother brother,
 And all the world bound in the chains of love.
 But if I speak to still unheeding ears
 The thunder of the wrathful gods shall fall
 Upon the stubborn, and the land shall groan
 With war, till at the last destruction come

Upon thee, in thy folly, and thou lose
Wife, kingdom, riches, power, and life itself."

So ended he, and straight composed himself
To death, and when the sun in order due
Entered the north, his mighty spirit fled
Into the realms of everlasting peace.

THE LEGEND OF THE FLOOD

THERE lived of old a sage of fame
And virtue ; Manu was his name,
And mighty were the austerities
Wherewith he sought to shake the skies.
Ten thousand years or so, 'tis said,
This sage did stand upon his head,
And many other things he did
By which his soul was comforted.

But when he went one day to lave,
His body in the sacred wave,
A tiny fish swam up and said :
“ O Rishi, save me from the dread
Of fearful death. 'Tis Nature's way
That larger fish on small should prey.
Our lives are spent without repose
In fleeing from our deadly foes.
I come to you with trembling breath
To save me from this living death,
And in due time, though weak I be,
I shall requite your charity.”
The Rishi smiled ; with gentle hand
He drew the little fish to land
And placed him in an earthen pot,
Where he, contented with his lot,

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Might swim in safety from his foe.
 And there the Rishi watched him grow
 And tended him with anxious care
 As woman tends the child she bare.
 So swift he grew (and fair withal)
 The little pot was soon too small
 Wherein to play and take his ease ;
 Then cried he, " Master, if it please
 You, take me out of this, and place
 Me in some free and ample space
 Where I may sport as fishes do
 And taste the joys of life anew."
 So Manu placed him in a tank
 Girt round with rushes, cool and dank,
 But ever grew he larger, till
 His bulk the ample tank did fill.
 Then Manu carried him with care
 To Ganga's¹ sacred waters, where
 He might within her bosom lie
 And live a life of jollity.
 Yet ever waxed he more and more ;
 From shore he stretched to distant shore,
 Till Ganga's self could not contain
 His mighty bulk ; so once again
 He cried, " O master, carry me
 To the illimitable sea."
 So Manu straight in loving wise
 Lifted him up, for all his size,

¹ Ganges.

And placed him in the ocean's bed ;
 Then rose he from the waves and cried :
 " Master, to you my life I owe ;
 And now my gratitude to show
 Since you have nursed my life with care,
 I straitly counsel you. Beware,
 For soon upon this wicked world
 The wrath of heaven will be hurled
 And those who dwell upon the ground
 And trees, and mountains shall be drowned
 In all-devouring waters,
 Upon that great, that awful day
 Shall wicked man be swept away
 With all his sons and daughters.
 Build you a vast and mighty ark
 Fitted with ropes ; therein embark
 With seven Rishis ; you shall store
 The different seeds, which men of yore
 Have counted. There preserve them well,
 And when the sea begins to swell
 I shall appear in wonder wise,
 A beast with horns between the eyes.
 Now I go hence ; my words obey,
 And save yourself on that dread day."

So fell it out ; the wrathful gods
 Chastised the sinful earth with rods.
 Down poured the rain ; the angry sky
 Lashed town and country from on high.
 The age-long mountains stood aghast

Swept by the fury of the blast
 Amid the welter of a world.
 High up to heaven the waves were whirled,
 To sink again with foaming hiss
 Into the nethermost abyss.
 And all that on the earth had stood
 Was drowned in that devouring flood.
 The trees fell prone ; the birds lay dead ;
 The tiger, startled from his bed,
 Rushed moaning through the desolate
 Forest to flee avenging Fate.

But Manu prudently obeyed
 The fish's warning unafraid
 And fashioned him a sturdy boat ;
 Then on the raging sea afloat
 His gallant ship did launch.
 The water seethed ; the sky was black ;
 And every plank did strain and crack,
 Yet still the ship was staunch.
 Though like a drunken man she reeled,
 She rode as one who scorned to yield.

Manu across the waters steered,
 When something like a rock appeared ;
 At once the monster's horn he knew
 And quickly bent his course thereto,
 Upon the horn his rope he cast
 And to the friendly fish made fast
 His ship, and through the waves they raced.
 Nought could he see but one sad waste



Upon the horn his rope he cast
And to the friendly fish made fast
His ship and through the waves they raced.

Of angry waters ; forest, town,
Beast, man, the gods had doomed to drown.
And still the tempest roared amain ;
Down from the sky the ceaseless rain
Descended ; there was nought afloat
Save Manu in his gallant boat.

So journeyed they for many a year
To where the Himalayas rear
Their topmost peaks, and on a crest
The weary vessel came to rest.
And such the legend's sacred fame
" Naubhudana " ¹ it has to name
Unto this day. Then Manu said :
" Farewell, my fish ; thou hast repaid,
More than repaid my care : farewell ! "
But lo ! a miracle befell—
The fish, as god made manifest,
In majesty the sage addressed :
" Brahma, creator of the universe,
Am I ; this evil world received my curse.
Of all the men that dwelt beneath the sun
In wickedness, thou wert the only one
Whose way of life I counted to be good.
Thus art thou saved from this devouring flood.
Now at thy word creation shall revive,
For unto thee this mighty power I give
That thou create in earth and heaven all things
that live."

¹ The grounding of the ship.

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This said, the god before their face
Suddenly vanished into space.
But Manu from that self-same hour
By penance sought to win the power
The god vouchsafed him ; and again
To fill the world with beasts and men,
With trees and flowers, woods and hills,
And streams with their attendant rills,
To give a new created earth
Another and a better birth.

THE STORY OF SAVITRI

THIS is the story of Queen Savitri,
King Aswapathi's daughter, and how she,
By noble constancy and steadfast faith,
Won back her husband from the grasp of Death.

When, as it chanced, the princes of the land
Came not as suitors for the maiden's hand,
And she was still unwed, her aged sire,
In ardent hope to achieve his heart's desire,
Sent her to distant lands to seek a mate.
Her quest fulfilled, unconscious of her fate,
The maid returned and "Sire," she said, "rejoice,
For I have found the husband of my choice,
The son of Dhyumatsena, blind and old,
A prince of virtues and of gifts untold.
The sightless King, by spiteful foes bereft
Of power, and exiled from his kingdom, left
His home, and with his wife and little child
He sought a refuge in the forest wild.
That child is Satyaván, a goodly prince;
On him is my election fallen, since
The choice is laid upon me. But the King
Cried out in deep alarm, "What is this thing

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That thou hast done ; alas ! my Savitri,
 Thou sayest sooth ; this prince in bravery,
 Mercy, and truth is glorious, so that none
 Excels him : I would take him for my son
 Gladly, but when a single year is fled
 Thy husband must be numbered with the dead.
 So have the gods decreed. Bethink thee now
 (Surely thou art absolvéd from thy vow)
 And choose another lord ! " But in her pride,
 " The die is cast ; I choose no more," she cried.
 " Be the life short or long, my choice is made,
 Nor will I take another : I have said."
 Then, for he saw her mind was wholly bent
 Upon King Dhyumatsena's son, he sent
 To ask the boy in marriage for the maid,
 And at the appointed time the twain were wed.

So passed a year ; at length the hour drew nigh
 When by the gods' decree the prince must die.
 The heart of Savitri was full of woe ;
 Three days she fasted and three nights also,
 And poured oblations to the God of Fire
 If haply she might have her soul's desire
 And win her husband's life. So on a day
 When Satyavána said, " I go away
 To gather fruit within the forest," she
 Eagerly answered, " Let me go with thee."
 " Nay," he replied, " dear wife, it is not meet ;
 The rugged path will tear your tender feet."

Yet did she so implore him that at last
He yielded to her praying, and they passed
Into the wood together. The wild birds
Sang them a welcome, and with pleasant words
The journey they beguiled, though like a pall
The heavy dread of what should soon befall
Hung over Savitri.

So through the wood
They went until they came where fruit-trees stood,
And Satyavána straight began to pluck
The fruit, and cut the trees, when anguish struck
Through all his limbs, a cold and clammy sweat
Broke out upon him and his brow was wet
With the great pain of it. "Alas!" he cried,
"Let me lie down a little by thy side,
And lay my head upon thy lap, for pain
Quite overcomes my spirit: I would fain
Sleep." And with that he laid him down. But she
Sat silent, watching what the end would be;
For she perceived the fatal hour was nigh
And in a little space her lord must die.

Then of a sudden she was ware of one
Clothed all in red and splendid as the sun,
But dark he was of face, his eyes were red,
And a great crown he wore upon his head.
Grisly his aspect was, and in his hand
He held a noose; but yet his form was grand
And royal. On the dying prince he gazed

With steadfast eyes, and Savitri, amazed,
 Laying her husband's head upon the ground,
 Whispered in awe, though voice she hardly found,
 "Who art thou, stranger? By thy majesty
 A god thou art: what wilt thou have of me?"
 He answered: "I am Yama; noble wife,
 Know that this man hath lived his span of life,
 And I am come to bind him with this noose,
 A dreadful bond, that no man may unloose,
 And hence will I conduct him to the place
 Where mortal man shall never see his face."
 With that from out the mouth a form he drew
 No bigger than a thumb; with lifeless hue
 The body lay, for with the soul the breath
 Departed, and the limbs were stretched in death.
 The mighty King of Death then bound the soul
 That it escape not from his stern control,
 And so departed to those regions grim
 Wherein he reigns. The princess followed him,
 Dissolved in tears; which when he saw, he stayed
 His journey south,¹ and turning back he said:
 "This life is ended; henceforth ye are twain;
 The last sad funeral rites for thee remain,
 Whither I go thou canst not come; turn back
 And homeward go thy ways." But she: "Alack!
 My lord, thou art my friend. Hear me, I pray,
 A little season; on the earth men say,
 For those who follow the divine behest

¹ Compare the death of Bhishma.



Grisly his aspect was and in his hand
He held a noose, but yet his form was grand
And royal. On the dying prince he gazed
with steadfast eyes.

And order well their lives, three ways are best.
To such who would be masters of the soul,
Life is self-sacrifice and self-control :
Free from the world's seductions, unperplexed,
They seek life's meaning in the forest ; next
Are those who, shunning Love's embraces, strive
After the goal of learning, and who live
Their lives with some great master separate.
Then, for the frailty of man is great,
And few there be who reach perfection, comes
The way of those who, dwelling in their homes,
And joined in harmony to virtuous wives,
Worship the gods of heaven in their lives,
For man and woman are not twain, but one,
Each doing what the other leaves undone,
A perfect whole in perfect halves, and thus
A way of life is opened unto us
Less difficult, less thorny to be trod,
Whereby to attain the excellence of God.”
And Yama said : “ O wise beyond thy years,
These words of thine are pleasant to my ears ;
Ask what thou wilt, and I will grant it thee
Saving alone this life I bear with me.
But come not further on this dolorous way.”
And she : “ Have patience ; 'tis my wish to stay.
My husband's father was by wicked hands
Despoiled of all his power and his lands,
And, blind and old, he lives in endless night
Within the hermitage. Restore his sight,

And, if thou wilt fulfil my whole desire,
Make him as mighty as the sun or fire."

And Yama easily granted her request.

Whereat she answered : " Sir, that way is best
Which leaves me with my lord ; it tires me not.
For wise men say that happy is the lot
Of those who with the righteous converse hold,
But those who count them as their friends three-
fold

Are blessed, for as cool refreshing showers
Invigorate the thirsty trees and flowers,
So the companionship of virtuous men
Revives our thirsty souls." And he again ;
" Thy words are like sweet music played in tune ;
Ask what thou wilt, I grant a second boon,
Saving alone this life I bear with me."

Then she once more : " Lord, of thy charity,
Restore his kingdom to the aged King
And grant that he be wise in everything,
As well befits a ruler. Thou art great,
And ever dost thou keep inviolate
The laws thyself hast made. Therefore thy name
Is Yama amongst men. Like a clear flame
Of lamps in darkness shining is the light
Of virtuous men who, willing to do right,
Show grace and mercy to all things that live,
And even to a vanquished foe will give
Aid and protection. Thus hath God decreed
That man to man should act in word and deed."

Well pleased, the monarch granted her once more
Whate'er she would, except the life he bore,
And she replied again : " Men say with scorn
That of my royal father's loins are born
No sons. I pray, if thou wilt hear me yet,
That he may now a hundred sons beget
To keep his line among the sons of men."
Again the boon was granted, and again :
" Hear me once more," she said, " a little space.
The good rejoice, the wicked flee thy face ;
Thou sittest on the throne and judgest right ;
Therefore men call thee King of infinite
Justice, but since our feeble minds are prone
To lean on judgment other than their own
Whereby to walk aright, it is most meet
That weaker men should, sitting at their feet,
Learn wisdom from the wise, in deed and word
Justly to deal with man and beast and bird.
And so we seek the righteous man for friend
Since trust of friendship cometh in the end."
Then the delighted god : " Thy little word
Is full of wisdom ; I have never heard
Such excellent discourse from learned men,
Except this life, ask what thou wilt again."
" Lord grant me now," she answered, " that there
 come
Of Satyavána's loins, born of my womb,
A hundred sons." " I grant them all," he said.
" Thou canst not see the regions of the dead ;

Lady, turn back and homeward go thy way."
 "Alack! My lord, thou wilt not say me nay.
 I think not of my sorrow; only this,
 That to remain with him is all my bliss.
 Justice, and truth, and mercy—and the crown
 Of all is piety! The sun goes down
 And rises, and the stable earth is fast
 Throughout the years, the future and the past
 Are ordered, by the will of pious men.
 The righteous and the pious know no pain
 In their sweet intercourse, and in their eyes
 The noblest virtue is self-sacrifice,
 Heedless of what shall follow it, whereof
 All earthly creatures learn to live and move."
 She ended, and the enraptured god replied:
 "O noble wife, of self-devotion tried
 And matchless constancy, thy words have won
 Me quite, for never yet beneath the sun
 Throughout the endless ages have I quaffed
 From lips of mortal men so rich a draught
 Of wisdom; I have given thee great and small
 Gifts, now I grant one greater than them all."
 Then cried the princess: "Mighty lord, the vow
 Which thou hast vowed thine handmaid even now,
 That I should have a hundred sons is vain
 And all my hope is vanished into pain
 Unless my lord be risen from the dead
 And come again to share the marriage bed.
 Without him death is sweeter far than life,

For what without the husband is the wife ?
Heaven is as nought ; say rather it is hell
If lone and widowed I am forced to dwell.
Nay, by thine honour, if a god thou be,
Fulfil thy vow, restore my lord to me.”
Then Yama, for he now perceived the guile
Wherewith she tricked him, answered with a smile,
As he unbound the noose. “ I grant the crown
Of thy devotion ; he shall win renown
Throughout the world in ages yet to be ;
This is the guerdon of thy constancy,
And from thy womb a hundred sons shall rise
Whose glory shall be such that on this wise
Was never glory yet, that so thy line
From age to age as Malavas shall shine
Like to the sun, and like the clouds of heaven
Before the wind their enemies shall be driven
Before them.” And forthwith the mighty god
Left her and journeyed to his own abode.
But she with joy returned upon her way,
Until she came to where her husband lay,
And when at length the ashy corpse she found,
She nursed the dear head, sitting on the ground.
But he, like one who after many years
Returns from distant climes and sees and hears
The old familiar things, yet strange they seem,
Gazed round bewildered, and as in a dream,
“ O ! I have spent too long,” he said, “ in sleep.
Why did you not awaken me ? Why keep

Your silent watch beside me ? Where is he ?
 (Methought it seemed as he were dragging me
 Away.) Where is that dark-envisaged one ? ”
 “ Dear Lord,” she said, “ Yama is come and gone,
 The mighty God of Death. Thy sleep was long ;
 Rise up now, if thou canst, refreshed and strong ;
 Let us go homeward now, for lo ! the night
 Is falling fast and the pale glimmering light
 Is fading.” But, as though he would recall
 The things that in a vision did befall,
 “ Methinks,” he murmured, “ that we came for
 fruit

And anguish overcame me ; by the root
 Of this great tree I laid me down and slept
 Whilst thou beside me patient vigil kept ;
 And it was dark when suddenly a bright
 Effulgence with intolerable light
 Shone round about ; was this but fantasy ?
 Or fell it out as I have said ? ” Then she :
 “ ’Tis very dark ; the night comes on apace,
 And beasts are howling in this fearsome place.
 Let us go hence ; to-morrow I will tell
 Thee truly all the tale of what befell.”
 So hand in hand they took their journey home,
 But when they to the hermitage had come
 They found the aged King restored to sight ;
 And soon the spiteful foe was put to flight,
 Recovered were the riches and the land ;
 Such benefits were wrought by Yama’s hand,

THE STORY OF SAVITRI

113

And in due time a hundred sons were born
To Savitri, as glorious as the morn.

This is the story of Queen Savitri,
The wife of Satyavána, and how she
Restored her father in a single hour
To sight, to wealth, to kingdom and to power,
And how by constancy and noble faith
She won her husband from the grasp of death.

THE VISION OF THE DEAD

SO the night fell, and when the evening rites
Were done, King Dritiráshtra, purified
In mind and body, sat by Ganges stream
With all his court about him. But apart,
Screened from the eyes of men, Gandhári sat,
Gathering the royal ladies round her. Thus
The people of the country were arrayed
According to their dignity and years.

Then Vyasa, sage incomparable, plunged
Into the waters of Bhaghirathi
And summoned with the trumpet of his voice
The souls of heroes who had lately striven,
Both those who fought amid the Pándu ranks
And those their enemies. Forthwith arose
A multitudinous clamour, as of men
Who strove once more on Kurukshetra's field.
Rose from the waters of Bhaghirathi
Thousands of heroes slain, by Bhishma led
And Drona, Brahman chief, their bodies now
Transfigured, in the self-same armour clad,
And in the self-same cars as when they fought
On earth, but now resplendent with the glory
Of heaven upon their heads. Anger and pride,

116 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

And those bad passions which entangle men
In enmity, had fled ; with heavenly hymns
Gandharvas sang their praise and bards retold
The story of knightly deeds. On moved the host,
With shining wreaths about their brows, all light,
By heavenly nymphs attended.

And the King,
Blind Dritiráshtra, by the sage endowed
With vision more than human, saw the sight
Ineffable of that illustrious host ;
And Queen Gandhári, in that strength divine,
Beheld again her children and the throng
Of warriors slain. Amazement fell on all
The folk and fear at that mysterious scene,
That seemed like some glad carnival of men,
Or like some picture painted by the hand
Of cunning artist on the canvas. Thus
The heroes, purged of hate and jealousy,
Met in sweet counsel, like the immortal gods
Who dwell in heaven, and on their faces shine
The light of happiness. Father and son,
Wife joined to husband, friend to friend, they moved.

And Pándu's sons, from where they sat, beheld
Approach the shade of Karna, mighty bowman,
And sprang to meet him ; like great-hearted men,
Laying aside all rancour, they conversed
In joyous love and peace.

So passed the night
In sweet companionship ; the very place

Seemed to those Kshatriya warriors heaven itself,
 For grief was not, nor any discontent,
 Neither was sound of fear or of reproach
 Heard through the host ; in the fulness of that joy
 Evil was swallowed up. Nor less the women
 Rejoiced to see their husbands, brothers, sons,
 For one brief night to wake the memories
 Of bygone years.

And then the spell was broken,
 And in the twinkling of an eye the host
 With all its glittering pomp of chariots,
 Of arms and flags, at Vyasa's bidding plunged
 Beneath the waves of Ganges' holy stream
 And vanished. Each went to his several place
 Among the regions of the blessed gods.

Then, waist high standing in the sacred stream,
 Vyasa the virtuous sage cried out and said :
 " O noble dames who boast the Kshatriya line,
 On whom has fallen the curse of widowhood,
 If there be any who would fain rejoin
 Their hero husbands, tarry not, but dive
 Into these holy waves." And they with joy
 Making their due obeisance to their elders,
 Dived where the host had passed before—and now
 They walk, bright spirits in the realm of heaven,
 With glad surrender of their mortal flesh,
 In heavenly vesture robed and heavenly gems,
 Blest in the dear companionship restored.

THE DESCENT INTO HELL

AMID the splendour of the heavenly courts
With wistful longing King Yudishtira
Sought for the dear companions of his life,
But sought in vain. He saw Duryodhana,
Seated on high, and glorious as the sun,
By the bright company of heaven attended.
Then in his wrath he cried, "No heaven is this,
If I must share it with mine enemy,
For whose unholy sake kinsmen and friends
Were sacrificed—who even dared insult
Our wife, the faultless Draupadi. Ye gods,
Show me that region where my brothers are."
Back came the answer ; " 'Tis not meet, O King ;
In heaven all strife must cease, Duryodhana
Hath poured his body in libation out
Upon the fire of battle. Fearlessly
He fought, as well beseems a Kshatriya,
And for this virtue shall not his reward
Be granted him ? Remember not the woes
He caused on earth, forget the insults heaped
On Draupadi. For here are blotted out
Hatred and wrath." Whereto the King replied :
"Nay, if this kingdom be Duryodhana's,

If heaven be won by that unrighteous man
 Who ruined the whole earth, destroyed his friends,
 And kindled guilty wrath in us, the wronged,
 Tell me, I pray you, where my brethren dwell.
 Where is the place of righteousness and truth,
 The place of Karna, the unconquerable,
 Of Dhristidyumna, mighty warrior,
 And those the other Kshatriyas who died
 For my sake ? Shall I be content to dwell
 Without them ? Nay, ye deities, I vow
 That where they are, be it in heaven above,
 Or in the realms of Yama, there shall I
 Remain to share whatever be their lot.
 This, too, my constant sorrow, when I marked
 How close the likeness of my mother's feet
 To high-souled Karna's, that I did not serve
 With him for chief. Verily had we been
 United with that child of the Sun in battle,
 Not Shakra's self could then have conquered us.
 Would that I now could see his face ! Alas !
 'Twas I who slew my kinsman by the hand
 Of Arjuna. Stark Bhima and the Twins
 Dearer to me than life, and Arjuna
 Glorious as Indra's self and Draupadi
 The blameless—let me see them once again.
 Hold me not here, for what is heaven to me
 If I must live apart from those I love ? ”
 “ Be it according to thy prayer, O son,”
 The gods replied. “ If such be Indra's will

We shall perform thy wishes. Take this guide,
The messenger of the gods, and he will show thee
Thy kinsmen and the region where they dwell."

So they together went, the heavenly guide
Leading the way. Thick darkness overspread
The difficult path, prepared for sinners' feet.
Foul hair and slimy weeds instead of grass
It had for carpet; ever and anon
The groping traveller slips in bones and blood,
Maddened by gnats and wasps and stinging flies
Which hover round, while from the thicket glare
The fiery eyes of grisly beasts of prey.
And flaming fire shows all along its length
Where rotting corpses lie; vultures and crows
And evil bird-like shapes with beaks of iron
Hang poised above the place. So passed the King
Weary and footsore on that dolorous way.
Mountainous masses barred his onward path,
Like to the Vindhya, inaccessible,
And boiling rivers threatened death; they plunged
Into a forest, where, instead of leaves,
The trees grew swords and razors; issuing thence,
They came upon a desert, furnace hot
With blinding sands and rocks of glowing iron.
Then said the King, "How long must this endure,
My guide, and whither tends this dreadful path?
Where are my brethren? Are there any gods
Who claim this kingdom?" Came the reply:
"Thus far;

And now, obeying the divine commands,
 I halt ; if thy strength fails, return with me.”
 Faint with the noisome stench, and sick at heart,
 The King turned back ; at once the air was full
 Of piteous voices crying, “ Leave us not :
 Ah ! stay awhile ; thou bringest a cool breeze .
 And the sweet savour of thy body falls
 Like balm upon our anguish ; let the joy
 Last but a little longer ; ease for us
 Our torments.” And the King, irresolute,
 Stood still for sorrow of heart ; the voices came
 Familiar, yet unrecognised, like sounds
 Heard in a dream that still escape the mind.
 And standing there he shouted, “ Who are ye ? ”
 Why do ye tarry here ? ” Straight from all sides
 They answered, “ I am Bhimasena—and I
 Arjuna—Karna—Draupadi, thy wife—
 And we the sons of Draupadi.” Then he,
 Musing, exclaimed, “ What fickle Fate is this
 That thus condemns the innocent to hell
 And thrones that other in prosperity ?
 Have these unwitting sinned, who on the earth
 Were known for righteousness and truth, for all
 Deeds that became a Kshatriya ? Do I dream ?
 Or am I mad ? ” Then he burst out in rage :
 “ Where is your justice, ye immortal gods ?
 What are thy judgments, Dharma, which uphold
 The wicked and condemn the innocent
 To hideous pain ? ” And, turning to the guide,

124 TALES FROM THE MAHÁBHÁRATA

Therefore, O King, I sent my messenger
 And bade him show thee hell, that so thy soul
 Might profit ; yet to thee and all thy brothers
 'Twas but a phantom vision. Come, O King,
 And see thy kinsmen purified of guilt,
 Karna and Draupadi and Arjuna
 Enthroned in heaven. Put away thy grief,
 And let the fever of thy heart be cooled ;
 Henceforth, having endured a little while,
 Thou shalt not know what sorrow is, nor pain,
 But served by pure-robed maidens thou shalt live
 In happiness. Here flows the heavenly stream,
 The holy Ganga ; plunge in this and lose
 Thine earthly form with all its grief and hate.”
 And Dharma, King of Justice, added : “ Son,
 I am well pleased that thou hast borne thyself
 With loyalty and truth and self-control ;
 For these three times I put thee to the test
 And thou wast not found wanting. In the wood,
 When to the lake thou cam'st to gather sticks,
 I proved thee. Then, in likeness of a dog,
 When all thy brothers and thy wife had fallen
 By the way, again I proved thee ; this is now
 The third and last test. For thy brothers' sake
 Thou wast content to abide in hell. Awhile
 This sorrow thou hast seen ; now cleansed of sin
 Live on in glory ; this was but a phantom,
 For neither Arjuna nor Bhima long
 Should suffer pain, unmeet for righteous men.

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 For neither Arjuna nor Bhima long
 Should suffer pain, unmeet for righteous men.

Come thou, my son, to holy Ganges come,
Which the three worlds embraces with its stream."

So he, obeying the divine behest,
Plunged in the sacred waters and put off
His mortal form ; and purified in heart
And mind, he journeyed with the heavenly host
Unto the place of heroes, where he dwells
With all his brethren in eternal peace.